



CDC'S CAMPAIGNS TO

# STOP OVERDOSE

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention  
National Center for Injury  
Prevention and Control

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## OVERVIEW

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is working to reduce the number of fatal and nonfatal overdoses and support communities as the United States drug overdose epidemic reaches a new phase.

An effective response would highlight drug use trends and encourage harm reduction practices or ways to safely reduce risk for oneself or others.



**Data showed that polysubstance use is a growing issue.**

Polysubstance use is the use of more than one drug, including when two or more are taken together or within a short time, either intentionally or unintentionally. Nearly 50% of drug overdoses involved multiple drugs in 2019.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 40% of overdoses had a bystander present who could have intervened.<sup>2</sup> These statistics suggested a need for information about harm reduction strategies, like naloxone, and guided our focus to create tools to help save lives.

One in seven Americans reports experiencing a substance use disorder.<sup>3</sup> Substance use disorders are treatable diseases, yet stigma about substance use disorders remains a barrier to treatment and recovery. Obstacles like stigma contribute to the evolving epidemic and must be addressed to help communities stop overdose.

Our efforts to improve messaging on these topics revealed opportunities for four new education campaigns. The campaigns offer resources that speak to the reality of drug use, provide practical ways to prevent overdoses, educate about the risks of illicit drug use, and show ways to get help.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db428.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/stopoverdose/naloxone>

<sup>3</sup> SAMHSA. 2020, August 19. Opioid Overdose. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/medications-counseling-related-conditions/opioid-overdose>

# EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS TO PREVENT DRUG OVERDOSE

Through preliminary research and strategic workshops, CDC identified four areas of focus to address the evolving drug overdose epidemic.

The campaigns aimed to educate younger, at-risk audiences about preventing overdose (fatal and nonfatal) and substance use-related harms, focusing specifically on:



Understanding the dangers of **fentanyl**



Educating about the risks and consequences of **polysubstance use**



Promoting the lifesaving power of **naloxone**



Supporting recovery to **reduce stigma**

The intended audience for these campaigns is people who use drugs between the ages of 18-34. Secondary audiences include those who support people who use drugs, like friends, family, recovery/treatment specialists, first responders, pharmacists, and healthcare providers.

We designed each campaign to be relatable and effective for our primary audience and used formative testing and previous communication research to develop and refine content for each campaign. Insights learned from the research process were used at every stage of campaign development, informing language used and visual design. The result was educational, audience-centric campaigns that stand out from traditional anti-drug messaging and what's typically promoted in the public health space.

# FORMATIVE RESEARCH

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**Formative research is critical to the development of any effective campaign and helps define the community of interest and identify ways to reach the intended audience.**

Findings and lessons learned from previous CDC outreach and communication efforts were considered when developing the messaging and outreach strategies.

We completed an environmental scan of national, state, and local drug overdose prevention efforts, literature reviews, social media assessments, as well as in-depth interviews with Certified Peer Recovery Specialists (CPRS) to test initial campaign concepts and messaging.

Once refined based on key findings, campaign concepts were tested with the intended audiences through another round of 60-minute in-depth interviews to get unfiltered reactions and gauge strength, relevance, and clarity. These interviews were extremely valuable and helped refine the concepts and accompanying messages even further.

Using the refined and vetted concepts, a broader suite of products and materials were created (static and animated ads, radio spots, video public service announcements (PSAs) and more). The final step was red flag testing the campaign materials with our primary audience. Interviewees flagged potential concerns or threats in the content, such as offensive messages, triggering imagery, or unrelatable/inauthentic stories.

## Key Audience Insights

**Several findings guided key choices in our communication efforts.**

First, we learned that message framing and tone are critical. The audience drew a clear line between a humorous and a condescending tone; the same between being serious and generating fear.

Additionally, select informants from the audience of people who use drugs cared about the health and safety of friends and loved ones. Participants were motivated by a desire to keep people safe, to be a support system for others, and to humanize others like themselves. Participants struggled with seeing themselves in depictions or photographs of people who use drugs. They felt people who use drugs or live with substance use disorders aren't limited to a defined appearance or existence.

Lastly, this audience had strong opinions about visual elements like color, font, type, and texture. These elements were almost always immediately pointed out, in both positive and negative ways, and at times prevented an interviewee from processing or retaining any other part of the communication.

***“It’s known that fentanyl can be laced with heroin, but a lot of people do not realize meth can be laced and so can pills.”***

— Female 25–34, IDI Participant

We learned many key findings about participants’ polysubstance use trends and patterns. Individuals believed they understood the risks of using multiple drugs and felt confident that they could safely mix drugs. This belief presented an opportunity to educate them about the consequences and risks associated with specific drug combinations. Participants also shared how they communicate about specific drugs, providing insights into drug terminology and slang.

***“This is something that a kid uses to save his best friend. Like people should have this, not just like medical officials.”***

— Male 18–24, IDI Participant

Another key insight was that many participants were not aware of the medication naloxone or its uses; although, when asked, some were familiar with the brand name Narcan. The audience clearly wanted and needed information about naloxone, specifically the use case and accessibility of the medicine. Participants liked the idea that they could use naloxone to help save lives.

***“A lot of people aren’t treated like humans when they’re addicts ... just treated with disregard or people don’t want anything to do with you.”***

—Male 18–24, IDI Participant

Stigma associated with drug use and substance use disorders was a prominent theme in the formative research findings. Direct and indirect experiences with stigma were common. Some interview participants noted there can be stigma associated with having or carrying naloxone. The ideas that addiction is a treatable disease and that recovery doesn’t look the same for everyone were both very well received. Participants confirmed the need to focus on reducing stigma linked to different types of treatment, particularly medication-based treatment. They also revealed that stigma exists in the recovery community. People in recovery can perpetuate stigma by judging others’ treatment pathways, especially ones that include medication.

***“For some reason inside the recovery community, people still see medication-assisted treatment as a ‘lesser than’ recovery program...‘well, they’re not really in recovery cause they still have a crutch or they’re still using drugs.’”***

- Certified Peer Recovery Specialist

Additionally, red flag testing uncovered areas where we could enhance the campaigns, including:

- Showing a full naloxone nasal spray in campaign materials to increase recognition
- Removal of cracked/chipped pill imagery from ads as it could be triggering
- Removal of ad versions that were deemed unclear and ineffective
- Emphasizing compassion and empathy in voiceovers featuring naloxone and stigma

# CAMPAIGN MATERIALS

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**The final design of each campaign took into account the full range of insights gathered from formative research.**

Details such as texture, color palette, language, clear calls to action, and more were adjusted throughout the development of campaign materials. Each campaign leveraged insights and data gathered from research to stand out wherever ads and other campaign materials were disseminated.

## PRODUCT AND MATERIALS LIST

- **Website**
- **Video PSAs**
- **Billboards**
- **Bus Shelter Ads**
- **Posters**
- **Paid Search Ads**
- **Digital Display Ads**
- **Static and Animated Social Media Ads**
- **YouTube Ads**
- **Streaming Audio/ Radio Ads**
- **Fact Sheets**
- **PowerPoint Decks**
- **Postcards**
- **Pharmacy Bags**
- **Delivery Bag Inserts**



# FENTANYL



**For the fentanyl campaign, the messaging led with an attention-grabbing insight for people who use drugs: “Drugs don’t come with an ingredients list.”**

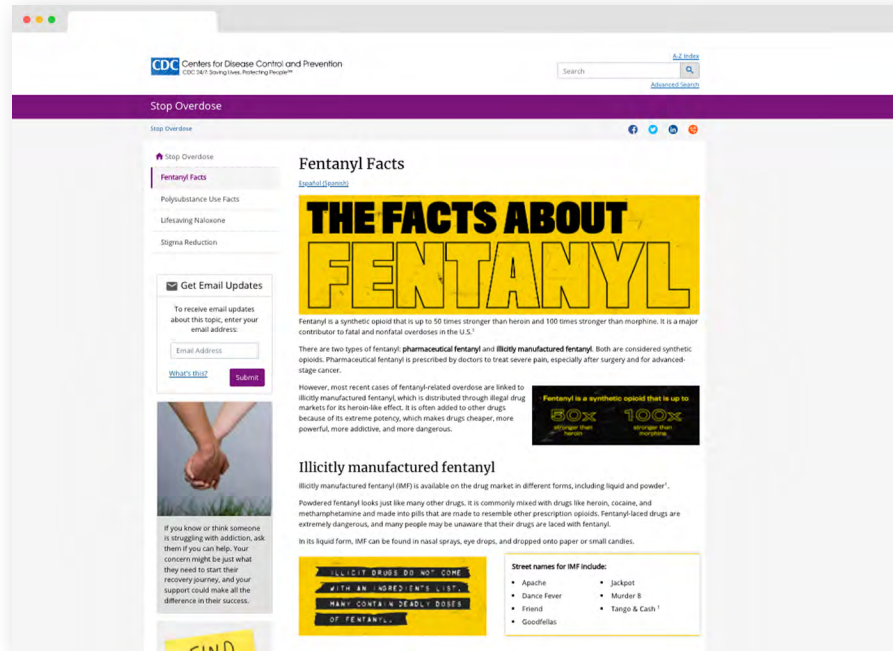
The line brought immediate attention to the common use of fentanyl as an additive to drugs, and the danger associated with the use of fentanyl-laced drugs. The public service announcement (PSA) video depicts the dangers of illegal fentanyl in the drug supply, with relevant facts incorporated throughout to caution the audience that fentanyl could be in their drugs, and they wouldn't be able to see it, smell it, or taste it. A spotlight was put on the dangers by posing questions to the viewer and listing the unsettling and lethal ingredients.

## VIDEO PSA





CAMPAIGN-SPECIFIC WEB PAGES



BILLBOARD



BUS SHELTER AD

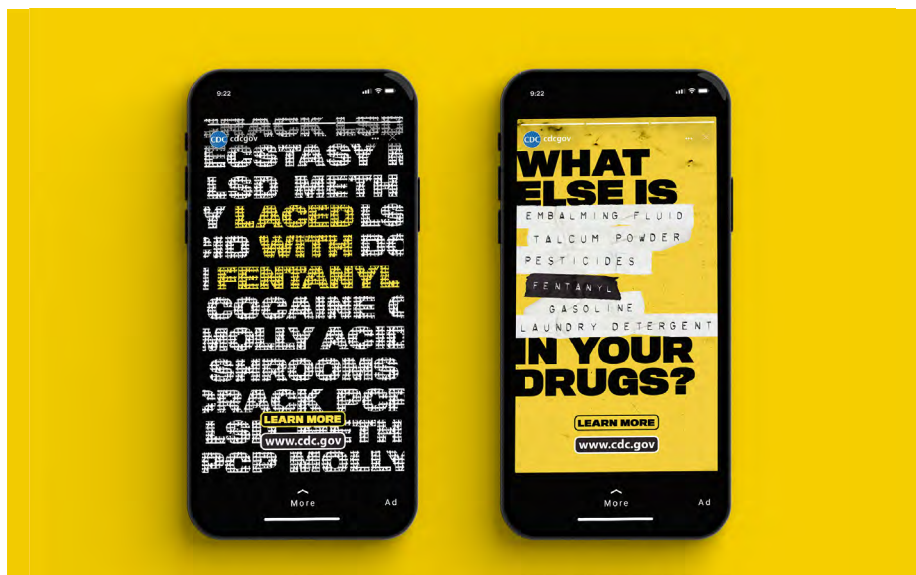
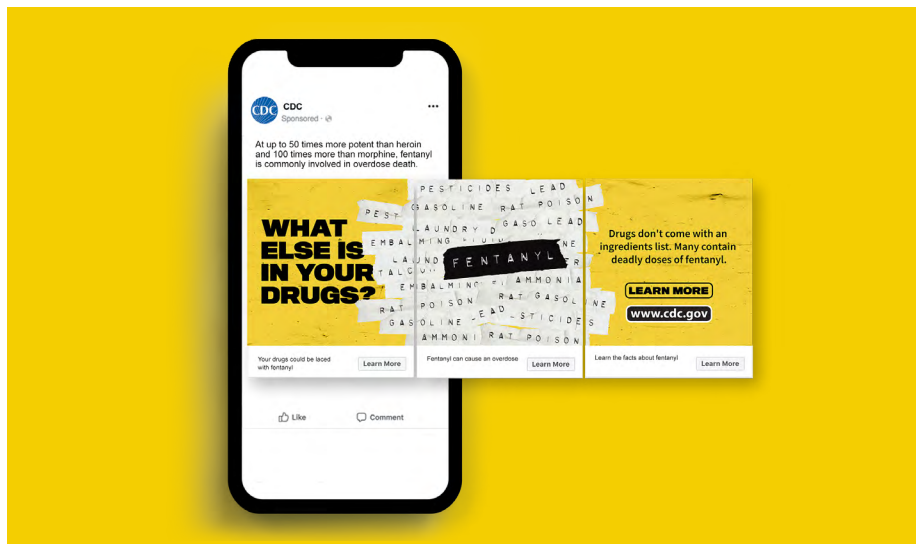




DIGITAL DISPLAY ADS



STATIC AND ANIMATED SOCIAL MEDIA ADS

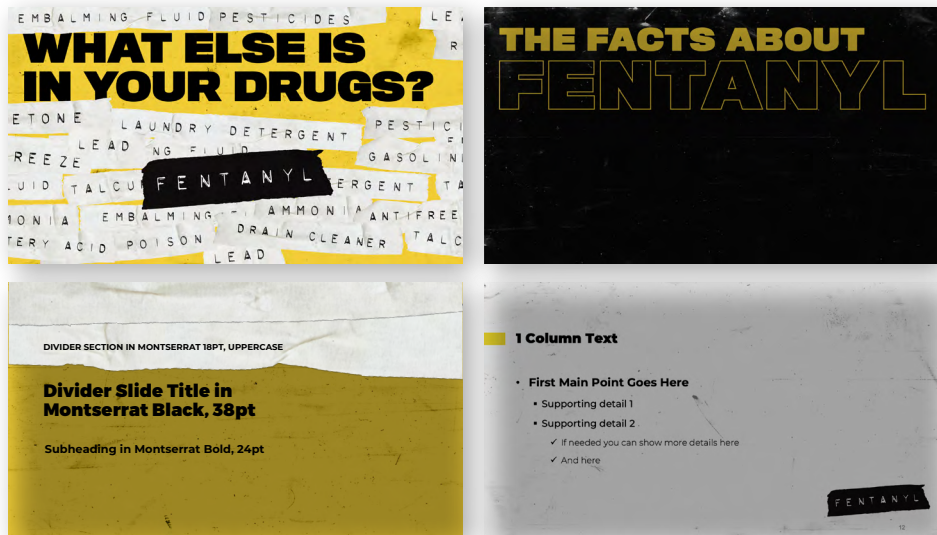




FACT SHEETS



POWERPOINT DECK



# POLYSUBSTANCE USE

**The polysubstance use campaign focused on countering a misconception revealed during formative research— that there is a safe way to mix drugs.**

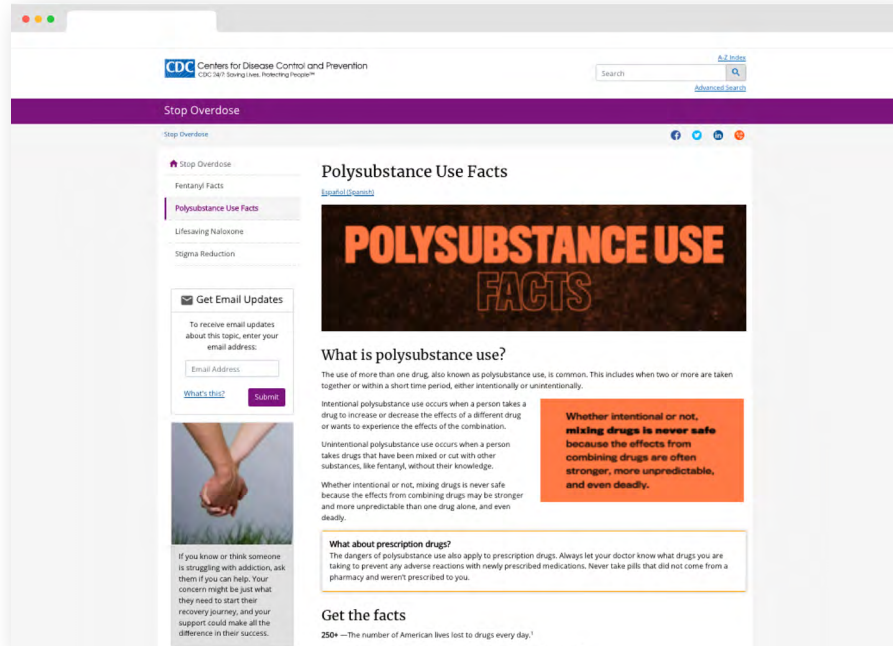
We paired drug combinations, using audience-familiar language like “uppers” and “downers,” with related consequences in hopes to change this behavior. Throughout the campaign, visceral imagery like a rapidly beating heart, pumping lungs, or an EKG flatline helped convey the serious and potentially deadly nature of mixing drugs.

## VIDEO PSA





CAMPAIGN-SPECIFIC WEB PAGES



BILLBOARD



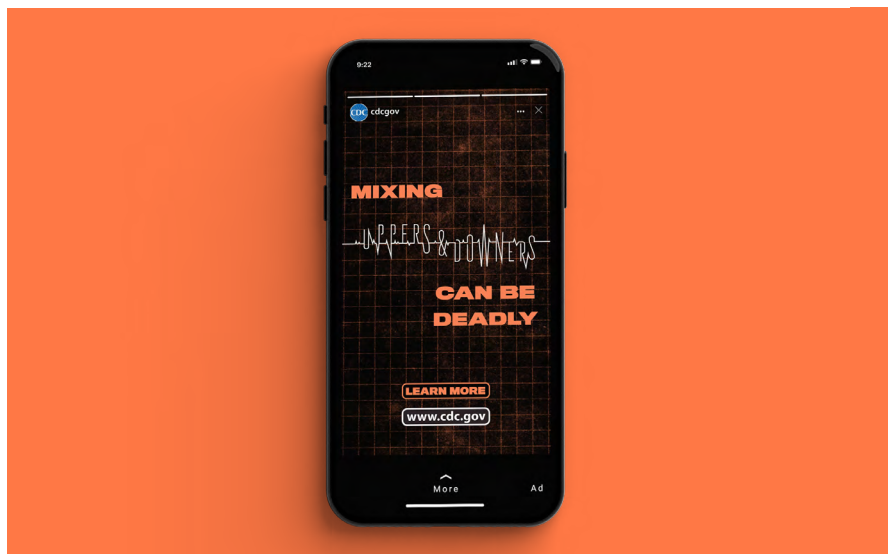
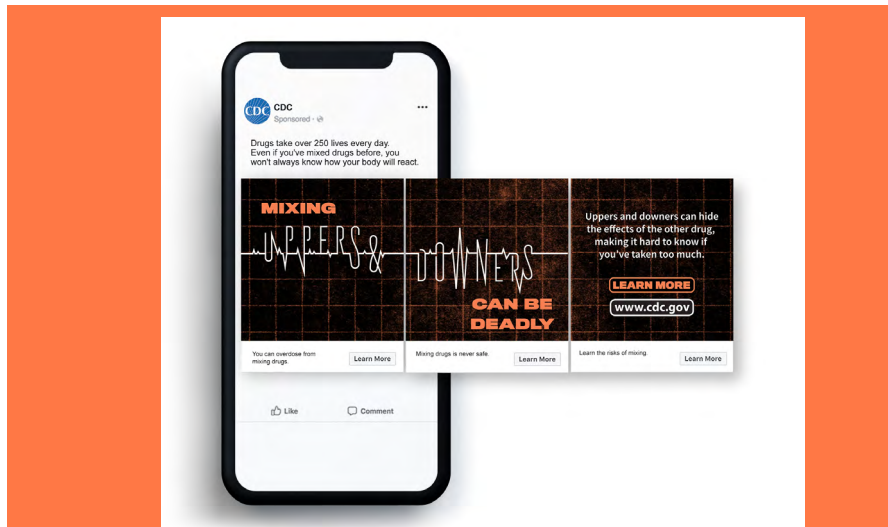
BUS SHELTER AD



### DIGITAL DISPLAY ADS



### STATIC AND ANIMATED SOCIAL MEDIA ADS





FACT SHEETS



POWERPOINT DECK



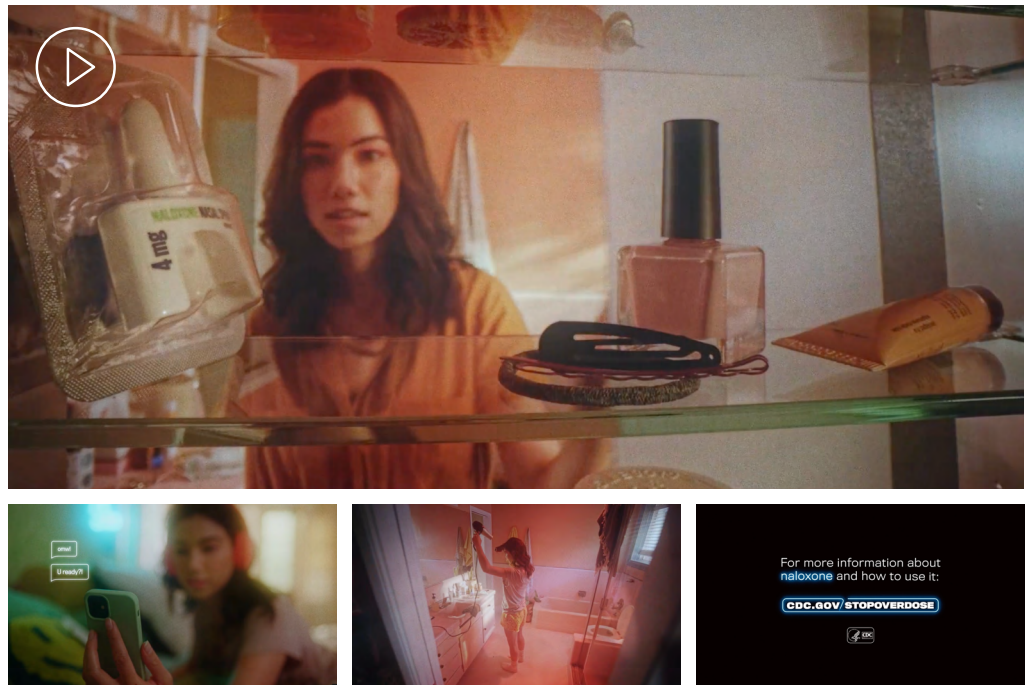


# NALOXONE

**The naloxone campaign raised awareness about this harm reduction strategy through a succinct message: naloxone can reverse an opioid overdose and save lives.**

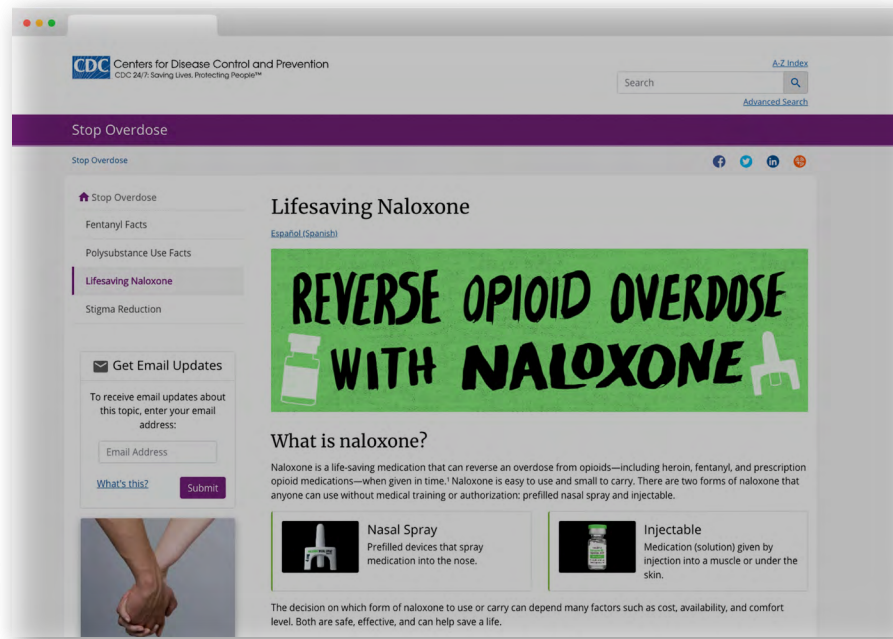
The shape of the nasal spray was featured in all imagery to increase recognition among the audience, as formative research insights revealed that a clear and direct display of this harm reduction strategy would be useful to the intended audience. The campaign aims to answer any questions the audience might have about naloxone and make them feel empowered to carry it and have it. The PSA video tells a relatable story of grabbing all of the essentials before leaving the house, including naloxone, emphasizing naloxone as an essential item to have when going out.

**VIDEO PSA**





**CAMPAIGN-SPECIFIC  
WEB PAGES**



**BILLBOARD**



**BUS SHELTER AD**

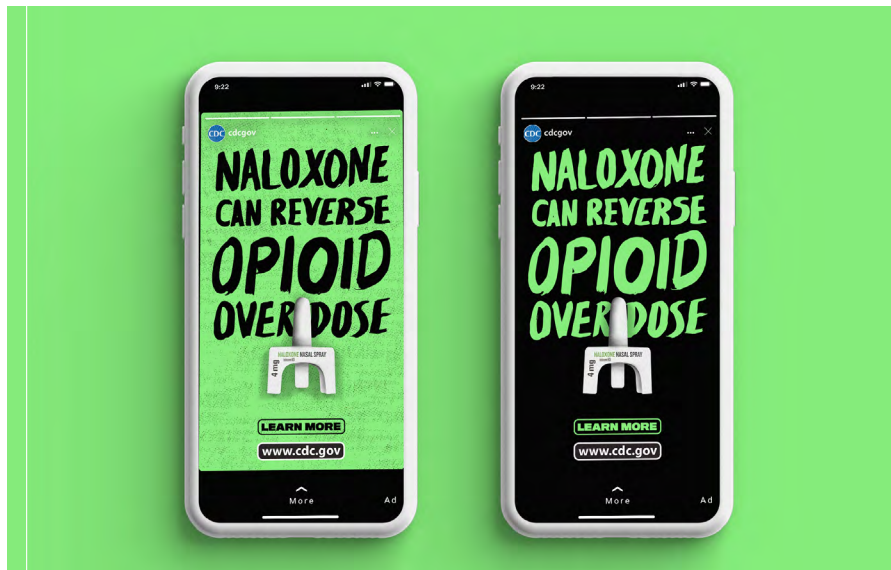
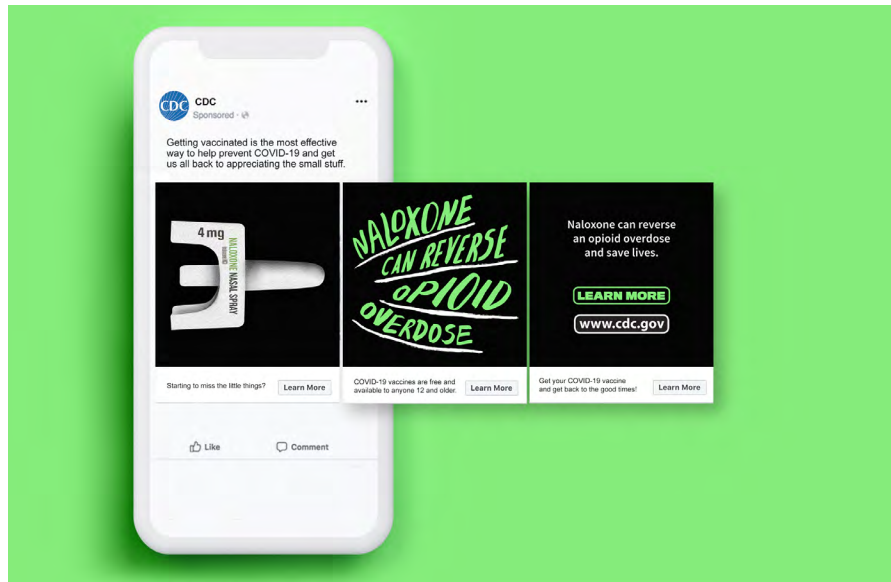




DIGITAL DISPLAY ADS



STATIC AND ANIMATED SOCIAL MEDIA ADS

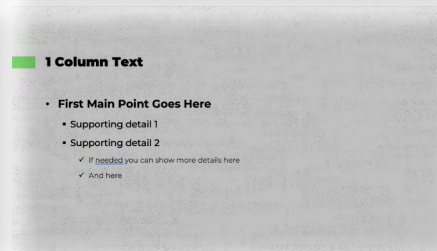
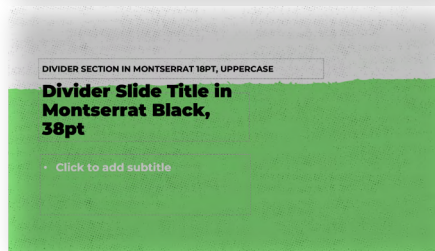
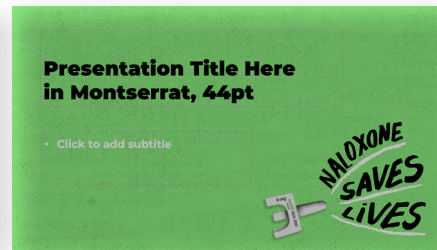




FACT SHEETS



POWERPOINT DECK



PHARMACY BAGS



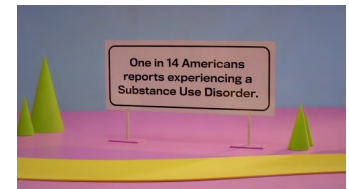
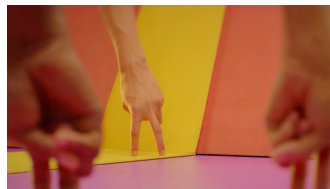


# STIGMA

**The stigma campaign used a path as both a metaphor and a visual theme to convey that recovery is an individual journey.**

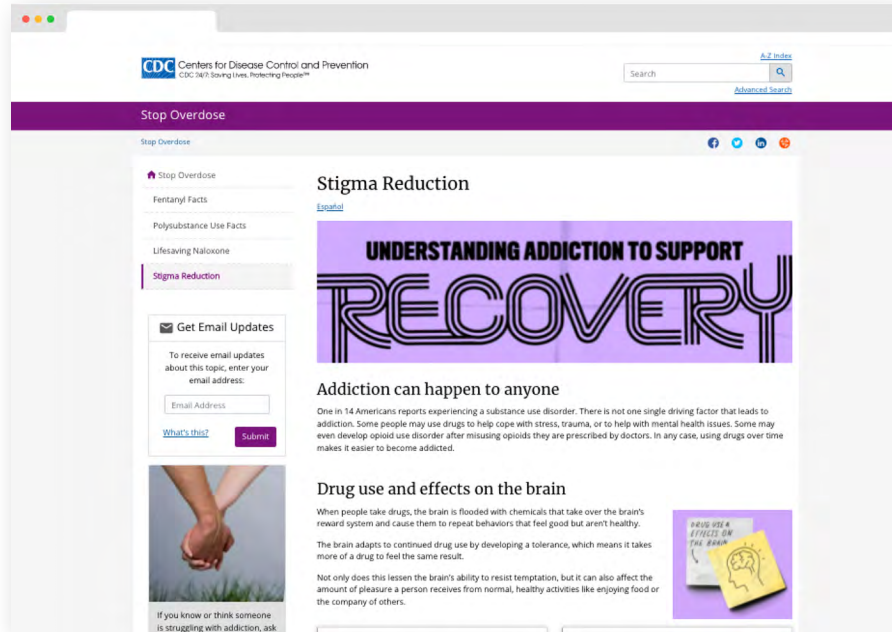
This idea tracks back to the sentiment shared by participants that addiction and recovery doesn't look the same for everyone. Purple, the official color of recovery, as well as handwritten notes of encouragement were used across products and materials with the intent to uplift and affirm the audience while acknowledging stigmas related to drug use addiction. The PSA video focused on a single recovery journey and demonstrated the importance of social support.

## VIDEO PSA





CAMPAIGN-SPECIFIC WEB PAGES



BILLBOARD



BUS SHELTER AD

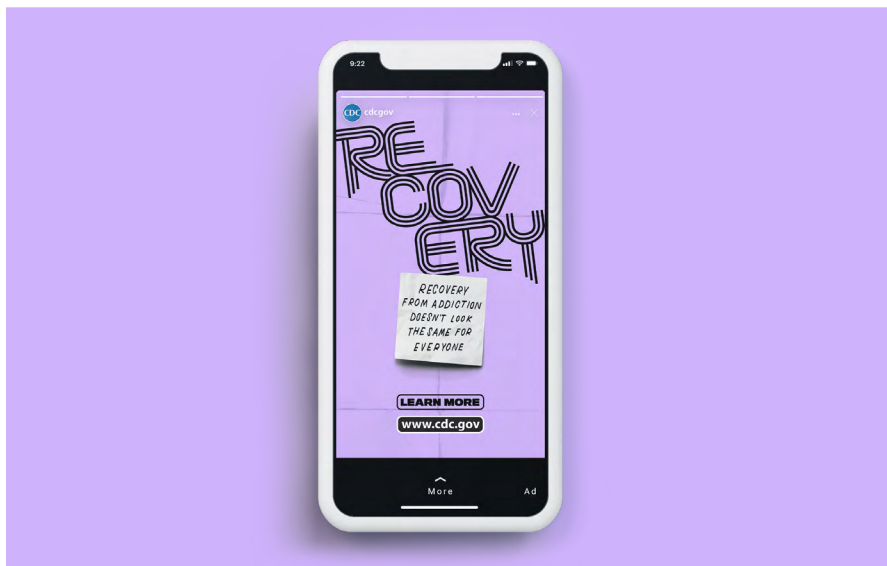
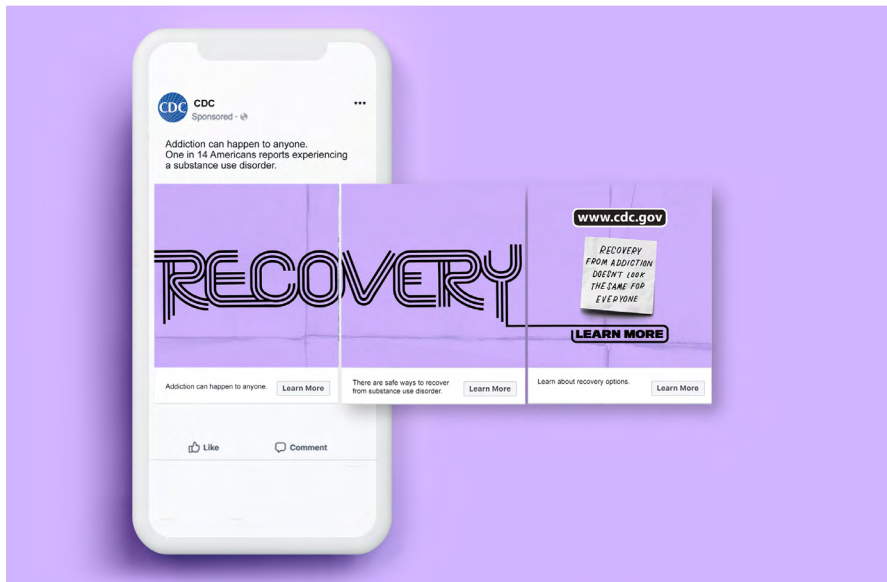




DIGITAL DISPLAY ADS



STATIC AND ANIMATED SOCIAL MEDIA ADS

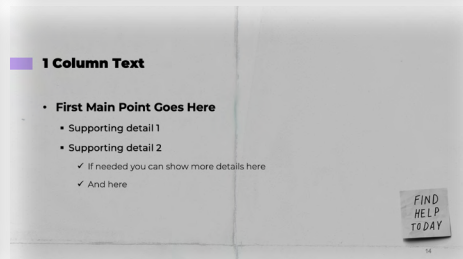
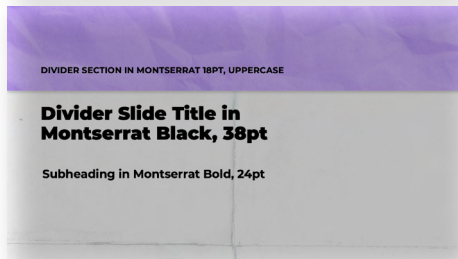
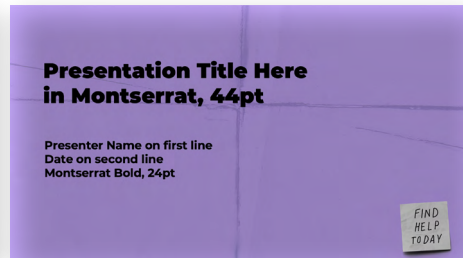
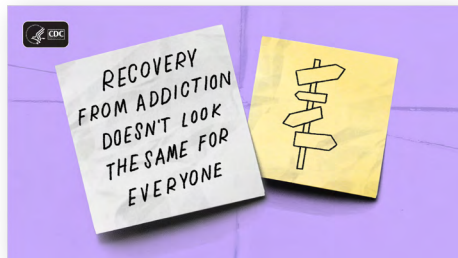




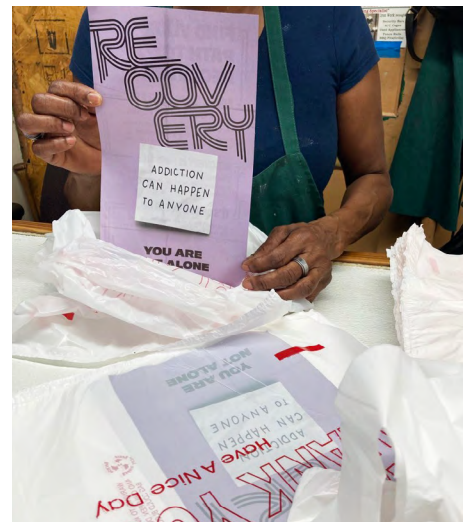
FACT SHEETS



POWERPOINT DECK



DELIVERY BAG INSERTS





# LAUNCH AND ROLLOUT

The campaigns were created for CDC-funded jurisdictions to implement in their communities across the country.

These groups can tag all campaign assets for local use as well as access tools and resources to support use of the campaign materials and develop capacity to design, frame, and implement the campaigns. Campaign materials will be publicly available in the future through an online resource center.

All campaigns were distributed nationally across the following channels:

- Internet-Connected TV and Streaming Video
- Streaming Audio
- Digital Display Ads
- Social Media
- Paid Search Ads
- Out-of-Home (Billboards, Wall Posters, Airport Ads, and Bus Shelter Ads)
- YouTube

IMPRESSIONS ACROSS CAMPAIGNS FROM AUGUST 2021 → SEPTEMBER 2022

# 2.55B TOTAL

These are cumulative performance metrics across platforms, tactics, and campaign flight schedules.

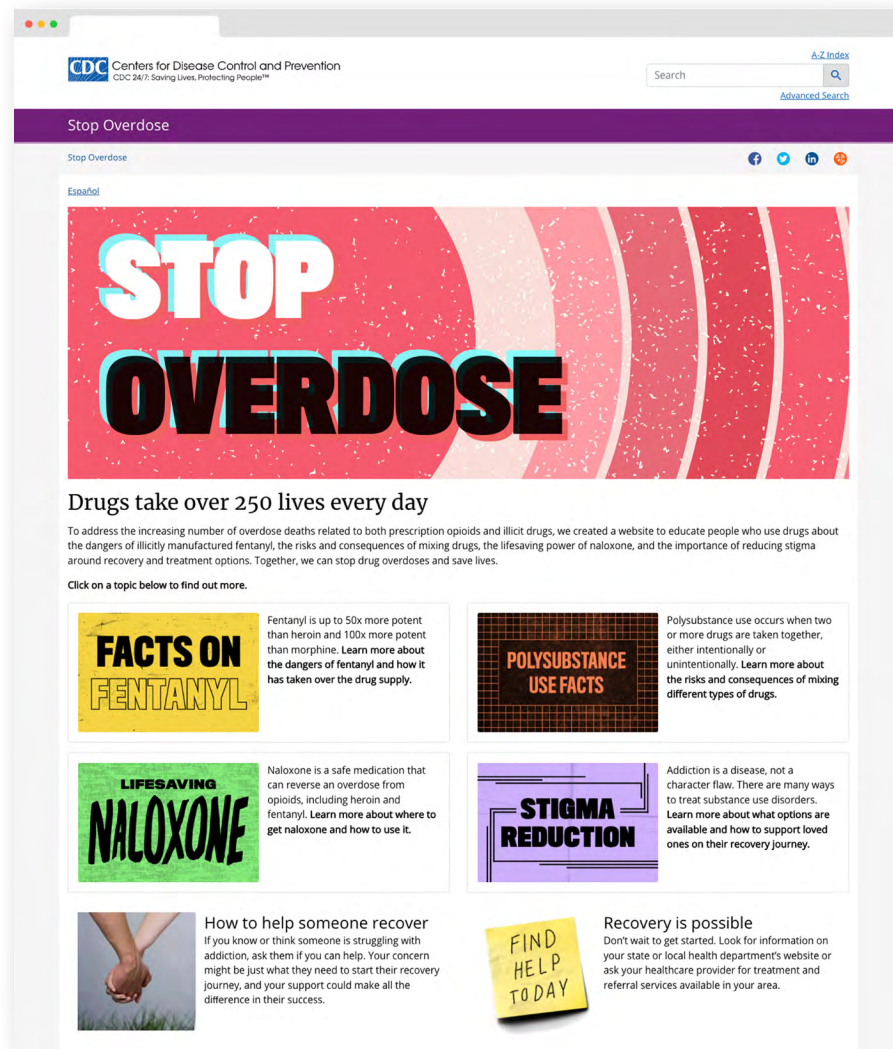
**442M**  
Paid

**1.81B**  
Donated

**305M**  
Earned

## Stop Overdose Landing Page

The connecting feature for these campaigns is the Stop Overdose [website](#), launched as a resource library for people who use drugs and their loved ones. Each subpage on the website features campaign messaging, supporting data, and resources for our intended audiences.





# CONCLUSION

## **The campaigns serve as a solid foundation for a new phase of overdose prevention messaging.**

Each empowers our audience to help reduce overdose deaths. They guide action through awareness, engagement, and empathy. The use of innovative creative design creates opportunities to expand campaign content easily and deploy new dissemination tactics on an ongoing basis.

## **We will continue to evaluate how emerging drug trends affect different groups, including people who are underserved or who have limited access to resources and care.**

We will continue to address the growing public health challenges related to drug overdose. Plans to expand these campaigns are underway, and we are developing additional products and materials. We intend to broaden the scope covered in each of these campaigns, create audience-specific content, and pioneer new methods to ensure we reach more people as technology and behavior changes.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

CDC would like to acknowledge the valuable contributions of ICF Next and Brunet-García in the development and dissemination of the overdose prevention campaigns. CDC also recognizes its Division of Overdose Prevention subject matter experts, along with the Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health (OASH), and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Public Affairs (ASPA), for their content reviews, collective input, and contributions to the campaigns.

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