



NIH HEAL Initiative Meets the Moment

National Institutes of Health's Helping to End Addiction Long-term Initiative is finding scientific solutions to address the opioid crisis.

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An article published in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) highlights the results of numerous strategies through which the National Institutes of Health's Helping to End Addiction Long-term Initiative, or NIH HEAL Initiative, is finding scientific solutions to address the nation's opioid crisis.

The task is even more urgent since the COVID-19 pandemic fueled a nearly 30% increase in overdose deaths in 2020, the highest 12-month increase in decades. To date, the initiative has funded \$1.5 billion to more than 500 research projects to address opioid misuse and pain management.

NIH HEAL Initiative director Rebecca G. Baker, PhD, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke director Walter J. Koroshetz, MD, and National Institute on Drug Abuse director Nora D. Volkow, MD, describe progress from the initiative's multi-pronged approach that focuses not only on innovative research strategies in both pain and addiction, but also leverages the strengths of communities to address this public health crisis.

These efforts are already yielding results:

- Community-based programs such as the HEALing Communities Study have launched communication campaigns targeting stigma, delivered naloxone widely, and created real-time data dashboards to help guide community decision-making.
- Research has led to a new, non-opioid approach to treat neuropathic pain, currently granted an investigational new drug (IND) application through the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and 16 INDs have been approved for existing medications to be tested to treat opioid use disorder.
- Other novel treatments are emerging, such as an oxycodone vaccine that is currently being tested in first-in-human trials.

- New research showcases several innovative devices to treat infants with neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome or patients with chronic low back pain, reflected by FDA-granted “breakthrough device” status.
- Three large clinical studies are underway toward defining a standard of care for babies born dependent on opioids.

Meeting the moment, the NIH HEAL Initiative is harnessing the power of research to address a public health crisis and is releasing information rapidly. Findings and publications from initiative-funded studies are part of the HEAL data ecosystem, being built around a cloud-based computing platform that will provide access to the vast array of data generated.

These and future research findings will help the millions of individuals, families, and communities affected by poorly treated pain disorders and the opioid crisis.

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