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Attorney General Calls Attention to Heroin Overdose Crisis

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U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder on Monday called the increase in heroin overdoses "an urgent and growing public health crisis," *The Washington Post* reports.

Holder, who spoke in a video message on the Justice Department's website, said the government is encouraging emergency personnel to carry the overdose antidote naloxone.

The government is also targeting violent drug traffickers who bring heroin into the United States, Holder stated. He noted the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has opened more than 4,500 heroin-related investigations since 2011.

"Confronting this crisis will require a combination of enforcement and treatment. The Justice Department is committed to both," he said in the video.

Naloxone is becoming more widely available nationwide. California greatly expanded availability of the treatment as of January 1. Currently 17 states and the District of Columbia have adopted laws allowing family and friends of people who are addicted to heroin or prescription opioids to have the antidote.

The treatment, sold under the brand name Narcan, has been used for many years by paramedics and doctors in emergency rooms. It is administered by nasal spray. The medication blocks the ability of heroin or opioid painkillers to attach to brain cells. The U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy says it is encouraging police departments to carry Narcan.

In his statement, Holder said the DEA is trying to reduce the supply of heroin "at all levels of the supply chain." Officials are also working with law enforcement, physicians and others to increase prevention and treatment programs for heroin and prescription opioids. "It's clear that opiate addiction is an urgent — and growing — public health crisis," he said.

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