Washington State Department of Health
Office of Emergency Care Systems

EMS Guideline
Paramedic Buprenorphine Administration

Introduction

The Washington State Department of Health (department) developed this guideline for EMS physician medical program directors (MPD) who are developing prehospital patient care protocols for paramedic-level buprenorphine administration.

The department supports innovative solutions that address the ongoing opioid crisis in our state. The department approved pilot programs across several regions of the state that allow paramedics to administer buprenorphine in pre-hospital settings as part of emergency medical care. These pilot projects improve the ability of EMS providers to respond effectively to opioid overdoses by providing immediate intervention to stabilize patients experiencing opioid overdoses and reduce the risk of death through access to lifesaving treatment. This initiative is part of our broader strategy to combat the opioid crisis and improve emergency response capabilities.

Buprenorphine helps manage opioid withdrawal symptoms before they reach the hospital. Buprenorphine is an FDA-approved medication for opioid use disorder, proven to help reduce withdrawal symptoms and cravings, stabilize patients, and prevent further overdose. Administering buprenorphine in the field allows EMS professionals to act quickly, giving patients a critical opportunity to stabilize before reaching a healthcare facility for long-term treatment.

EMS services participating in the pilot collaborated with local opioid treatment resources, had physician medical oversight, and established training and safety protocols to ensure that paramedics administer the medication safely and effectively. As pilot project data became available, it has not uncovered any negative outcomes.

To continue to improve access to medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD) and to reduce the burden on MPDs establishing these programs, the department, in consultation with the MPDs and the Prehospital Technical Advisory Committee, adopted paramedic administration of the medication into the Approved Skills and Procedures for Certified EMS Providers.

MPD Guidance

MPDs who choose to include buprenorphine for paramedic administration in their county must:

- Develop or adopt a patient care protocol (protocol), as defined in WAC 246-976-010, consistent with the standards and criteria in this guideline. The protocol must be consistent with state standards, Regional EMS & Trauma Care Council PCPs, and COPs.

- Starting dose of 16 mg, max dose 32 mg
- Consider COWS of 4 or higher
- Age cut-off of 13
- Consider ondansetron for nausea/vomiting
- Consider acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain
- Avoid giving benzodiazepines for anxiety
- High level of caution in patients on methadone (Consider 48 hours -OR- + COWS >10")

- Develop or adopt buprenorphine and opioid use disorder education for paramedic providers.
  - Washington State Health Care Authority (HCA) / ScalaNW educational materials
  - DOH Education Material
- Identify local community partners willing to accept patients for warm hand-offs.
- Establish documentation and reporting standards, including a process for tracking refusals.
- Develop, implement, or verify measures to ensure safety and accountability, including managing and tracking the use of controlled substances to ensure compliance with federal and state regulations.
- Develop ongoing quality improvement, monitoring, and evaluation to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the use of the medication, with a focus on patient care and provider safety.
- Comply with data collection and evaluation efforts by the department.
- Ensure proper education of EMS providers and staff in terms of the appropriate documentation of administered medications (see WAC 246-976-455 for more information).
- Adhere to WAC 246-976 and any other applicable regulations.

Collaborative Resources

- Enroll your facility | ScalaNW Consider enrollment for follow-up and 24/7 appointment scheduling.
- Recovery Navigator Program | Washington State Health Care Authority
- ScalaNW_Opioid-Withdrawal
- ScalaNW_Adolescent_Buprenorphine-Initiation_R10
- ScalaNW_Buprenorphine-Initiation_R7

Questions regarding this guideline can be directed to hsqa.ems@doh.wa.gov.

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