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# A close look at the opioid epidemic in Madison County

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HUNTSVILLE, AL (WAFF) - The opioid epidemic is all around you, whether you know it or not.

Your friends, their kids, your coworkers are getting hooked and chasing their next fix. They are losing their jobs. They are turning to crime. They are finding themselves in jail or in the back of an ambulance.

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In Madison County, HEMSI runs on all opioid overdose calls. This sometimes happens once or twice a day, sometimes once or twice a week.

On Tuesday afternoon, it was two women at the same time in the same parking lot of a Huntsville discount store. Their bumpers were just feet from each other. One woman was found passed out in her car but eventually came to. Huntsville police pulled pill bottle after pill bottle out of her purse, saying they found opioids inside.

She was cuffed and hauled her off to jail.

At the same time, just feet away, another woman was passed out in another car. Authorities say they found heroin, a needle and a spoon by her body and they knew she overdosed on opioids.

HEMSI chief operating officer Don Webster said the woman was pregnant and has a baby at home.

Paramedics administered Narcan and saved her life, but no word the status of her unborn child.

These women were lucky. But that's not the norm in Madison County. HEMSI keeps count and says in 2017, only 30 percent of opioid overdoses in Madison County were women. Seventy percent were men. Eighty percent of those men were white, 50 percent in their 20s or 30s who got their fix on pills, injections, snorting or chewing a pain patch.

Half had taken heroin, half overdosed on prescription synthetic opiates like hydrocodone, methadone or fentanyl. And they lived all over town.

Paramedics say they see a lot of repeat customers. If they successfully revive someone a second time from an opioid overdose, there is often no third chance. Narcan doesn't always work.

One of the signs of an opioid overdose is white, frothy foam exiting the nose and mouth.

Fentanyl is absolutely the most dominant in drug-related deaths here. It is 5 to 100 times stronger than morphine alone.

Madison Police Chief Dave Jernigan said the addiction drives everything a person does. The opioid addiction rewires the brain so you are not thinking correctly. You think perhaps you can kick something, but you are actually physiologically and psychologically addicted.

Jernigan said addiction leads to unemployment, which can lead to crime, and that takes them to jail, or even worse, the morgue.

You are always chasing the high you first got, but you never quite get it. You are taking more opiates and when that doesn't work, you end up crushing them, injecting them, and when that doesn't work, you end up turning to heroin or fentanyl. You are constantly going for more potent drugs. You get in trouble. Your respiratory system is suppressed, and you die in your sleep.

If a person does live past an overdose and looks for help, it can mean a one to two-year inpatient recovery program to even have a chance at kicking the addiction. Inpatient means the addict isn't working. If that patient isn't working, then they may not have medical benefits to pay for the treatment.

That will be just one of the topics discussed at a communitywide forum at Bob Jones High School on March 1 at 6 p.m. The FBI, DEA, and Madison police will be there for the discussion and "Chasing the Dragon" screening. The forum is free, but you must register in the story link below.

**[READ MORE: [Free screening, panel discussion of opiate documentary on March 1](#)]**

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