



Yolo County Health & Human Services Agency



Douglas Brim
EMS Administrator

John S. Rose, MD, FACEP
Medical Director

DATE: January 15, 2026

TO: Yolo County Providers and Agencies

FROM: Yolo County EMS Agency

SUBJECT: Suspected Opioid Withdrawal Protocol Update

MEMORANDUM

Effective February 1, 2026, the attached Suspected Opioid Withdrawal Protocol Update will go into effect for all Yolo County Providers. The protocol App and Website will be updated. It is the responsibility of each agency to ensure that their personnel receive this information.

This is a mid-year update for best practice as recommended by the California Bridge.

UPDATES

Protocol:

Suspected Opioid Withdrawal

- **UPDATED:** Indication for suboxone administration updated to COWS score of 11 or greater

Please continue to document COWS scores for all patients complaining of withdrawal symptoms, as well as any patients that have received Naloxone for reversal of opioid overdose.

Please review the additions and changes thoroughly. If you have any questions, please contact Megan Rizzo at (530) 666-8675 or Megan.Rizzo@yolocounty.gov



SUSPECTED OPIOID WITHDRAWAL

Adult

Definitions

Opioid Withdrawal Disorder: A life-threatening condition resulting from opioid dependence and the cessation or reduction in opioid use that has been heavy and prolonged; or the administration of an opioid antagonist (e.g., Naloxone) after a period of opioid use. Signs and symptoms include:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Tachycardia | Nausea |
| Diaphoresis | Stomach/Abdominal cramps |
| Restlessness and/or Agitation | Body aches |
| Dilated Pupils | Achy bones/joints |
| Rhinorrhea or Lacrimation | Restlessness |
| Vomiting, Diarrhea | Hot and Cold |
| Yawning | Nasal congestion |
| Piloerection | |



COWS Calculator

MAT: Medication-Assisted Treatment

COWS: Clinical Opioid Withdrawal Scale - [MDcalc COWS Calculator](#)

ALS

Suspected Opioid Withdrawal Disorder

- Provide supportive treatment and counseling
- Assess patient interest in Suboxone (Buprenorphine and Naloxone)
- Assess for COWS
- Verify patient contact information
- Inform the patient that the hospital's navigator may initiate contact within 72 hours to offer additional treatment

COWS ≥ 11 and Patient Agrees to Treatment

- Give water to moisten mucous membranes
- Administer **16 mg Suboxone SL**
- Reassess after 10 minutes

If symptoms worsen or persist

- Re-dose with **8 mg Suboxone SL**
- Total max dose 24 mg SL

COWS < 11 or Patient Denies Treatment or is Ineligible

- Recommend transport
- Provide MAT brochure
- Provide Naloxone



Yolo County Emergency Medical Services Agency

Protocols

Revised Date: January 8, 2026

Contraindications

- Under 16 years of age
- Asymptomatic; No evidence or reported opioid withdrawal signs or symptoms
- Any methadone use within the last 10 days
- Altered mental status and unable to give consent
- Severe medical illness (sepsis, respiratory distress, etc.)
- Current intoxication or recent use of benzodiazepine, alcohol, or other intoxicants suspected
- Unable to comprehend potential risks and benefits for any reason
- Not a candidate for Suboxone treatment for any reason

Direction

- Contact Base Hospital for any treatment or transport concerns



Yolo County Emergency Medical Services Agency

Protocols

Revised Date: January 8, 2026

COWS Criteria

Anxiety or Irritability

- 0 None
- 1 Reports increasing irritability or anxiousness
- 2 Obviously irritable or anxious
- 4 Too irritable to participate or affecting participation

Resting Heart Rate *(Measured after sitting for 1 min)*

- 0 ≤ 80 BPM
- 1 81 – 100 BPM
- 2 101 – 120 BPM
- 4 ≥ 120 BPM

Restlessness *(Observed during assessment)*

- 0 Able to sit still
- 1 Reports difficult sitting still, but able to do so
- 3 Frequent shifting or extraneous leg/arm movement
- 5 Unable to sit still for more than a few seconds

Tremor *(Observation of outstretched hands)*

- 0 No tremors
- 1 Tremor can be felt but not observed
- 2 Slight observable tremors
- 4 Gross tremors or muscle twitching

Bone or Joint Aches

(If patient was having pain previously, only additional pain attributed to withdrawal is scored)

- 0 Not present
- 1 Mild diffuse discomfort
- 2 Reports sever diffuse aching of joints/muscles
- 4 Rubbing joints or muscles and unable to be still

GI Upset *(Over last half-hour)*

- 0 No GI Symptoms
- 1 Stomach cramps
- 2 Nausea or loose stool
- 3 Vomiting or diarrhea
- 5 Multiple episodes of diarrhea or vomiting

Gooseflesh Skin

- 0 Skin is smooth
- 3 Piloerection can be felt or arm hair standing up
- 5 Prominent piloerection

Yawning *(Observation during assessment)*

- 0 No yawning
- 1 Yawns once or twice during assessment
- 2 Yawns three or more times during assessment
- 4 Yawning several times per minute

Pupil Size

- 0 Pupils pinned or normal sized for ambient light
- 1 Pupils possibly larger than normal for ambient light
- 2 Pupils moderately dilated
- 5 Pupils very dilated

Runny Nose or Tearing

(Not accounted for by cold symptoms nor allergies)

- 0 Not present
- 1 Nasal stuffiness or unusually moist eyes
- 2 Nose running or eyes tearing
- 4 Nose constantly running, tears stream down face

Sweating

(Over past half hour not accounted for by environment or activity)

- 0 No report of chills or flushing
- 1 Subjective report of chills or flushing
- 2 Flushed or observable moistness to face
- 3 Beads of sweat on brow or face
- 4 Sweat streaming off face

TOTAL COWS SCORE:

- | | |
|---------|--------------------------|
| 5 – 12 | Mild |
| 13 – 24 | Moderate |
| 25 – 36 | Moderately Severe |
| > 36 | Severe Withdrawal |