In 2009, nearly 37,500 people died from drug overdoses in the US. That number, writes Maia Szalavitz[^1] in *The New York Times*, could be significantly lowered if Naloxone (Narcan), a drug used to counter the effects of opiate overdose, were available over-the-counter and placed in every first aid kit. However, Narcan currently requires a prescription though few people even know about it and few pharmacies actually stock it. Emergency physicians and EMTs are very familiar with its lifesaving efficacy, though. And the lack of general access to it is a problem, since Narcan can rapidly reverse the often deadly effects of an overdose of drugs like heroin and of prescription pain relievers like Oxycontin and Vicodin, the overdose rate for all of which more than tripled from 2006 to 2009.

So why isn’t Narcan more readily available? The opposition seems to stem largely from those who fear that reducing drug-related harm will lead to increased drug use among users who learn of its availability. This concept harm reduction is not widely accepted among those who moralize that nothing should be done to reduce the consequences of bad behavior, even if overdose fatalities result. However, as data on the now common practice of needle exchange have shown, such harm reduction practices do not lead to increased drug use. And more important, making Narcan readily available prevents deaths: The Harm Reduction Coalition reports that, by 2010, recovery projects had distributed 50,000 Naloxone kits nationwide, resulting in 10,000 reported overdose reversals.

Naloxone is known to bind to the opiate receptors in the brain, blocking the effect of narcotics but not causing any narcotic-like response, ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom explains. There is absolutely no reason it shouldn’t be readily available, especially since it comes in a nasal spray as an alternative to an injectable.

ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross, who has seen the dramatic results of Narcan firsthand when treating overdoses in the ER, agrees that the drug should be much more readily available to those who need it. This is a safe and effective antidote that should at least be available via prescription in a pharmacy, he says. Doctors should be prescribing Narcan for their patients who may benefit, especially when they prescribe opiate pain relievers.