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Mid Coast Hospital offering overdose-reversing med to new mothers

Maine set a record for drug overdose deaths in 2022, and hospital officials said they are trying new approaches to stem the tide.

BY JASON CLAFFEY TIMES RECORD

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A sign for Mid Coast Hospital at the exit of Medical Center Drive in Brunswick. C. Thacher Carter / The Times Record file photo

There were 716 documented drug overdose deaths in Maine last year, a new record, leading officials to launch new programs to try to stem the tide.

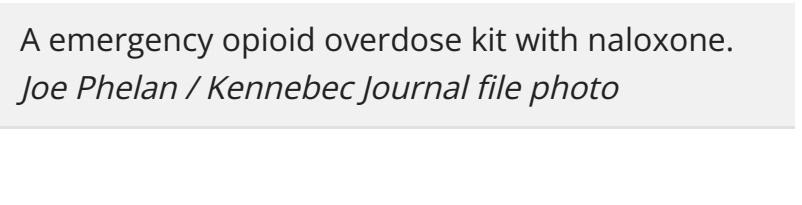
One approach, offering the opioid reversal agent naloxone to new mothers, has been expanded to Mid Coast Hospital in Brunswick.

MaineHealth announced the initiative in 2021 at Franklin Memorial Hospital in Farmington and LincolnHealth in Damariscotta soon followed suit.

“Distributing the kits with naloxone at the bedside opens the door to talking about accidental poisoning or overdose from opioids, helps reduce stigma and makes the decision to bring naloxone home easier for parents,” MaineHealth, which operates the aforementioned hospitals, said in a statement. “While the naloxone can be used within the family, if needed, the goal of community distribution is that naloxone is used wherever opioid overdose reversal is needed. By raising awareness of the signs and symptoms of opioid overdose and equipping families to give naloxone, more people are prepared to save a life.”

Naloxone, also known by the brand name Narcan, is a nasal spray that can revive people during an overdose of drugs like heroin, fentanyl, hydrocodone, codeine and morphine. Since 2019, state-distributed doses have reversed more than 7,100 overdoses, according to Gov. Janet Mills’ office. It was administered in only 25% of the fatal overdoses last year, according to the Maine Office of the Attorney General.

MaineHealth cited state statistics that in 2022, opioid overdoses were blamed in the deaths of 20% of women who died during pregnancy or within a year of giving birth.



A emergency opioid overdose kit with naloxone. Joe Phelan / Kennebec Journal file photo

“The postpartum period is uniquely stressful and may trigger opioid use or relapse,” Jay Naliboff, a retired doctor who delivered thousands of babies and helped start the naloxone program at Franklin Memorial Hospital, said in a statement at the time. “Providing naloxone to all new moms can increase community acceptance of naloxone while reducing the stigma associated with (opioid use disorder). This approach may save the lives of family members or friends and recognizes the potential for overdose in those without previously identified opioid use.”

Mid Coast Hospital, which delivers more than 500 babies a year, is offering new mothers naloxone as part of a free first-aid kit. It’s voluntary and confidential, according to MaineHealth. The naloxone is provided through funding from Portland Public Health.

“Opioid overdoses can happen to anyone, including those taking prescription opioid pain relievers after childbirth or surgery, children who are accidentally poisoned by opioids or buprenorphine and those with substance use disorder,” MaineHealth said.

“It’s important to recognize this program as a proactive way to increase the number of households that have this life-saving medication available in the event it is needed,” said Melissa Fochesato, director of community health at Mid Coast–Parkview Health. “It is not in response to overdose rates or maternal substance use disorders in our region.”

LincolnHealth, which has about 150 births a year, reported 90% of families offered a first-aid kit with naloxone have accepted it.

“The program is going very well,” Angela Russ, who manages Miles Maternity at LincolnHealth, said. “In September, 100% of families offered the kit with naloxone, harm-reduction education and other first-aid items accepted it.”

MaineHealth said other states have shown interest in distributing naloxone in maternity wards using the example set by Maine hospitals. Hospitals across Colorado last year started the practice.

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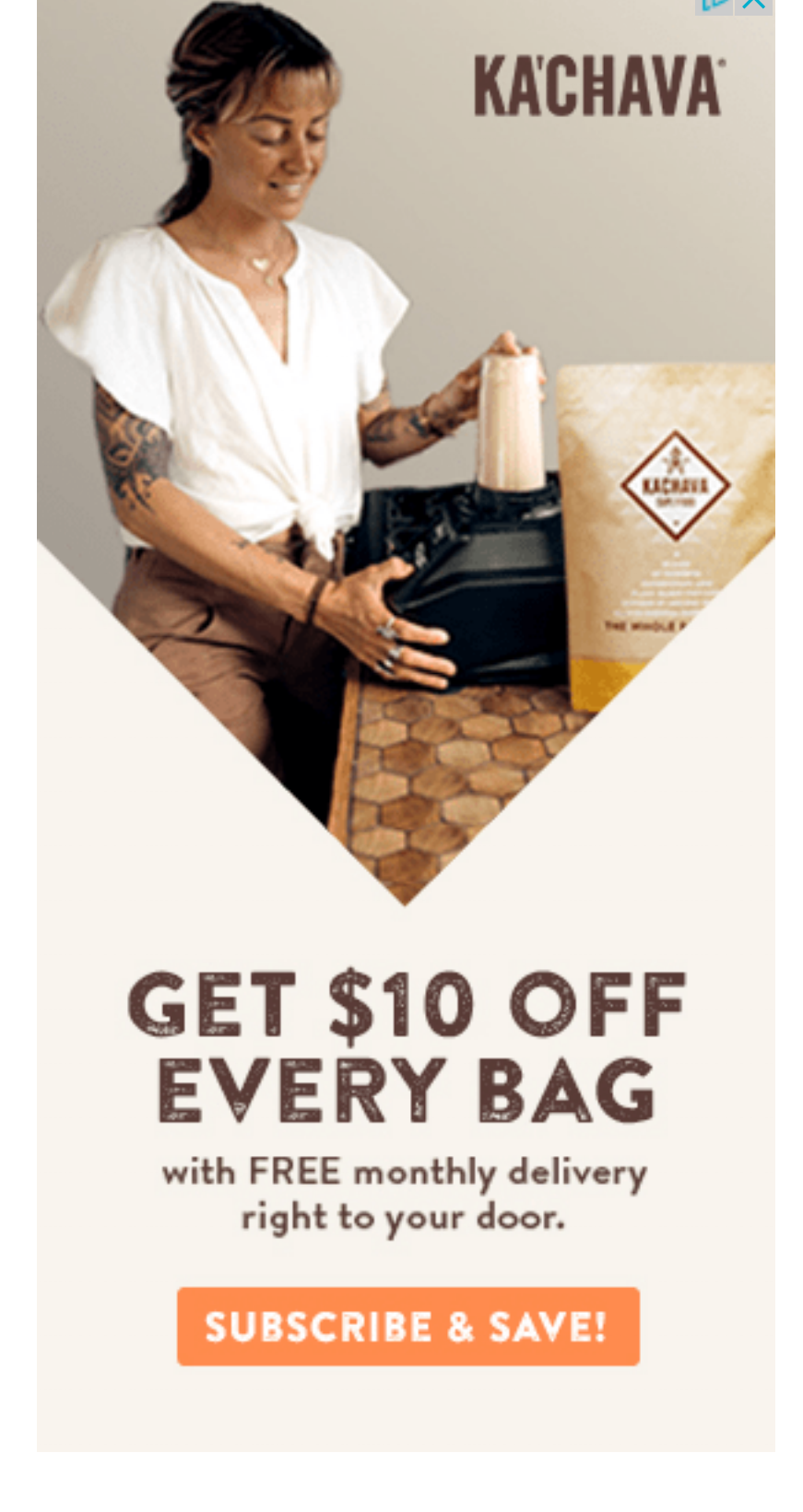
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