After seeing the life-saving impact of naloxone, Sharon Nedley won't leave home without it.

Nedley, a recovering drug user, was living in a community-supported housing unit in Glasgow, Scotland. One day, while sipping her morning coffee in the communal lounge, she learned from a startled staff member that her friend was in the throes of a drug overdose upstairs.

"When we went into her flat, she was sitting on the couch. She wasn't breathing," Nedley recalls. "We immediately got her onto the floor. I gave her a full dose of naloxone, as I had been taught to do, while a staff member gave her CPR."

Thanks to a training session that Nedley had followed, she knew how to safely administer naloxone, a pharmaceutical drug that rapidly reverses the harmful effects of opioids such as morphine, heroin and methadone.

"Within a couple of minutes, she sat bolt upright," says Nedley. "She immediately opened her eyes and said, 'I'm sorry.' My friend is here today because I gave her naloxone."

Wider access to naloxone

Nedley was able to access and administer naloxone as part of a government programme that aims to counter a rising trend in drug-related deaths. In 2009, there were 545 drug-related deaths in Scotland, nearly double the number recorded in 2000. By 2011, the death toll stood at 584, the highest on record.

Under the "Take Home Naloxone" programme, launched in November 2010, naloxone became accessible—after specialist training—to people at risk of an opiate overdose as well as to their circle of close friends and family.

The programme recognizes that timely treatment is critical to survival. "This is about buying time," notes Roseanna Cunningham, Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs. "It doesn't mean that you don't have to have very serious, very fast emergency medical intervention, but it gives you the time to get that intervention into place."

While touting the "huge importance" of the government's naloxone programme, the Minister cautions that it is no magic bullet. "This is one aspect of a whole set of interventions that are needed if we are going to make big inroads into the drug problem in Scotland," she says.

Early momentum

"I think the programme is really starting to gain momentum," says Kirsten Horsburgh, National Naloxone Coordinator at Scottish Drugs Forum, a non-profit organization that has supported

the government roll-out of “Take Home Naloxone.”

According to a new report from National Health Service (NHS) of Scotland, 6472 naloxone kits were issued in 2013/14 compared to 3878 kits in 2012/13—a nearly 70% increase. Most of the kits were distributed within communities to people at risk of an opioid overdose.

Between 2012 and 2013, the number of drug-related deaths in Scotland fell from 581 to 526. Can this dip in the death toll be attributed to the national naloxone programme? It is too early to tell, but early signs are encouraging.

Nurses in community addiction teams and pharmacists are starting to see naloxone distribution as part of “normal practice,” notes Horsburgh. This, in turn, has helped to break down barriers between health workers and people who use drugs, she says.

And there appear to be gains in the programme’s efforts to reduce drug-related deaths among people recently liberated from prison—a population at high risk of a fatal overdose. Since 2011, all Scottish prisons have provided naloxone kits to individuals on their release from custody. In 2012 and 2013, the proportion of opioid-related deaths among former inmates dropped by 50% in the four-week period following their release from prison, according to the new report from NHS Scotland.

New WHO recommendations

Globally, an estimated 69 000 people die each year from opioid overdose alone. Among people who inject drugs, opioid overdose is the second most common cause of death after HIV/AIDS.

New WHO guidelines, released on 4 November 2014, aim to reduce the number of opioid-related deaths globally. The guidelines recommend countries expand naloxone access to people likely to witness an overdose in their community, such as friends, family members, partners of people who use drugs, and social workers. In most countries, naloxone is currently accessible only through hospitals and ambulance crews who may not manage to get help to the people who need it fast enough.

Naloxone has been used in the management of opioid overdose for more than 40 years. It is a safe drug with a low risk of serious side effects. According to the guidelines, any adult capable of learning basic life support can also learn to recognize an opioid overdose, and administer naloxone in time to save lives.