

Opioid Withdrawal

Opioids are powerful substances that relieve pain. Opioids include illegal drugs, such as heroin, as well as prescription pain medicines, such as codeine, morphine, hydrocodone, oxycodone, and fentanyl. Opioid withdrawal is a group of symptoms that can happen if you have been taking opioids for a long time and suddenly stop.

What are the causes?

This condition is caused by taking opioids for weeks and then doing any of the following:

- Stopping use.
- Rapidly reducing use.
- Taking a medicine to block their effect.

What increases the risk?

This condition is more likely to develop in:

- People who take opioids incorrectly.
- People who take opioids for a long period of time.

What are the signs or symptoms?

Symptoms of this condition can be physical or mental. Physical symptoms include:

- Nausea and vomiting.
- Muscle aches or spasms.
- Watery eyes and runny nose.
- Widening of the dark centers of the eyes (*dilated pupils*).
- Hair standing on end.
- Fever and sweating.
- Intestinal cramping and diarrhea.
- Increased blood pressure and fast pulse.

Mental symptoms include:

- Depression.
- Anxiety.
- Restlessness and irritability.
- Trouble sleeping.

When symptoms start and how long they last depends on if you have been taking an opioid that works fast and then loses its effect quickly (*short acting-opioid*), an opioid that works for a longer period of time (*long-acting opioid*), or a drug that blocks the effects of opioids.

- If you have been taking a short-acting opioid, such as heroin and oxycodone, symptoms occur within hours of stopping or reducing the amount you take. The worst symptoms (*peak withdrawal*) occur in 24–48 hours. Symptoms should subside in 3–5 days.
- If you have been taking a long-acting opioid, such as methadone, symptoms can occur within 30 hours of stopping or reducing the amount you take and can continue for up to 10 days.
- If you are taking a drug that blocks the effects of opioids, such as naltrexone or naloxone, symptoms begin within minutes.

How is this diagnosed?

This condition is diagnosed based on:

- Your symptoms.
- Your medical history.
- Your history of drug and alcohol use.
- Which medicines you have been taking.

Your health care provider may:

- Perform a physical exam.
- Order tests.
- Ask that you see a mental health professional.

How is this treated?

Treatment for this condition is usually provided by mental health professionals with training in substance use disorders (*addiction specialists*). Treatment may involve:

- Counseling. This treatment is also called talk therapy. It is provided by substance use treatment counselors.
- Support groups. Support groups are run by people who have quit using opioids. They provide emotional support, advice, and guidance.
- Medicine. Some medicines can help to lessen certain withdrawal symptoms. Sometimes an opioid is prescribed to replace the opioid that you have been taking. You may be asked to take less and less of this opioid over time to lessen or prevent withdrawal symptoms.



Follow these instructions at home:

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- Check with your health care provider before starting any new medicines.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.

Contact a health care provider if:

- You are not able to take your medicines as told.
- Your symptoms get worse.
- You take an opioid after stopping use, or you take more of an opioid than you have been.

Get help right away if:

- You have a seizure.
- You lose consciousness.
- You have serious thoughts about hurting yourself or others.

If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:

- Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).
- A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.