

What You Need to Know About Prescription Opioid Pain Medicine

Opioids are powerful medicines that are used to treat moderate to severe pain. Opioids should be taken with the supervision of a trained health care provider. They should be taken for the shortest period of time as possible. This is because opioids can be addictive and the longer you take opioids, the greater your risk of addiction (*opioid use disorder*).

What do opioids do?

Opioids help reduce or eliminate pain. When used for short periods of time, they can help you:

- Sleep better.
- Do better in physical or occupational therapy.
- Feel better in the first few days after an injury.
- Recover from surgery.

What kind of problems can opioids cause?

Opioids can cause side effects, such as:

- Constipation.
- Nausea.
- Vomiting.
- Drowsiness.
- Confusion.
- Opioid use disorder.
- Breathing difficulties (*respiratory depression*).

Using opioid pain medicines for longer than 3 days increases your risk of these side effects.

Taking opioid pain medicine for a long period of time can affect your ability to do daily tasks. It also puts you at risk for:

- Car accidents.
- Heart attack.
- Overdose, which can sometimes lead to death.

What can increase my risk for developing problems while taking opioids?

You may be at an especially high risk for problems while taking opioids if you:

- Are over the age of 65.
- Are pregnant.
- Have kidney or liver disease.
- Have certain mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety.
- Have a history of substance use disorder.
- Have had an opioid overdose in the past.



How do I stop taking opioids if I have been taking them for a long time?

If you have been taking opioid medicine for more than a few weeks, you may need to slowly stop taking them (*taper*). Tapering your use of opioids can decrease your chances of experiencing withdrawal symptoms, such as:

- Abdominal pain and cramping.
- Nausea.
- Sweating.
- Sleepiness.
- Restlessness.
- Uncontrollable shaking (*tremors*).
- Cravings for the medicine.

Do not attempt to taper your use of opioids on your own. Talk with your health care provider about how to do this. Your health care provider may prescribe a step-down schedule based on how much medicine you are taking and how long you have been taking it.

What are the benefits of stopping the use of opioids?

By switching from opioid pain medicine to non-opioid pain management options, you will decrease your risk of accidents and injuries associated with long-term opioid use. You will also be able to:

- Monitor your pain more accurately and know when to seek medical care if it is not improving.
- Decrease risk to others around you. Having opioids in the home increases the risk for accidental or intentional use or overdose by others.

How can I treat pain without opioids?

Pain can be managed with many types of alternative treatments. Ask your health care provider to refer you to one or more specialists who can help you manage pain through:

- Physical or occupational therapy.
- Counseling (*cognitive-behavioral therapy*).
- Good nutrition.
- Biofeedback.
- Massage.
- Meditation.
- Non-opioid medicine.
- Following a gentle exercise program.

Where can I get support?

If you have been taking opioids for a long time, you may benefit from receiving support for quitting from a local support group or counselor. Ask your health care provider for a referral to these resources in your area.

When should I seek medical care?

Seek medical care right away if you are taking opioids and you experience any of the following:

- Difficulty breathing.
- Breathing that is more shallow or slower than normal.
- A very slow heartbeat (*pulse*).

- Severe confusion.
- Unconsciousness.
- Sleepiness.
- Difficulty waking from sleep.
- Slurred speech.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Cold, clammy skin.
- Blue lips or fingernails.
- Limpness.
- Abnormally small pupils.

If you think that you or someone else may have taken too much of an opioid medicine, get medical help right away. Do not wait to see if the symptoms go away on their own. Call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.), or call the hotline of the National Poison Control Center (800-222-1222 in the U.S.).

Where can I get more information?

To learn more about opioid medicines, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site Opioid Basics at <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdos/opioids/index.html>.

Summary

- Opioid medicines can help you manage moderate-to-severe pain for a short period of time.
- Taking opioid pain medicine for a long period of time puts you at risk for unintentional accidents, injury, and even death.
- If you think that you or someone else may have taken too much of an opioid, get medical help right away.

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.

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