

Safe Opioid Use



What Are Opioids?

Opioids are a type of medicine that can help reduce moderate to severe pain. Opioids are usually given after surgery or a major injury and are taken for a short amount of time. If you have chronic pain (pain that lasts longer than a few weeks), these medicines may be taken every day for a longer period of time. Opioids must always be prescribed by a doctor. It's very important to follow your doctor's advice about medicines for your safety.



Will Opioids Help My Pain?

Opioids can help relieve some types of pain. They may not take away your pain completely, but can help keep it under control. This can help you do the things you like to do every day. However, opioids are not for every type of pain. Using these medicines for a long period of time can have serious risks. It's important to talk with your doctor about whether opioids are right for you and your type of pain.



What Are the Side Effects of Opioids?

Opioids can cause side effects. These include:

- Feeling sleepy or drowsy
- Feeling confused
- Trouble having a bowel movement (constipation)
- Itching
- Sweating
- Feeling sick and vomiting



What Are the Risks of Opioids?

Opioids are very powerful medicines that can have serious risks. These include:

- Breathing problems. Opioids can slow your breathing down. This can be very dangerous.
- Increased pain. Sometimes opioid medicines make your pain worse.
- Tolerance. Tolerance means that you will need more medicine to get the same relief. Taking more medicine can raise your risk for side effects. Tolerance is not the same as addiction. If you feel that your medicine is no longer helping your pain, do not take extra. Call your doctor for advice.
- Addiction. Opioids can be very addictive. Addiction means that the urge to take your medicine becomes very strong and out of your control. It's important to use these medicines only as your doctor tells you to. If you misuse the medicine, you could become addicted.
- Withdrawal. After taking opioids for a while, your body gets used to the medicine. When you take less or stop taking opioids, you can have such symptoms as poor sleep, anxiety, feeling sick or vomiting, and diarrhea. You should never take less or stop taking your medicines unless your doctor tells you how to do so safely.

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Using Your Opioid Medicine Safely

- Never change or stop your medicine without first asking your doctor.
- Keep your doctor in the know. Be honest about all your current medicines and health history.
- Take your medicine only as your doctor tells you to. Do not take extra pills, even if your pain is bad.
- Store your medicine in the bottle or package it came in, in a locked cabinet, lockbox, and away from children and pets.
- Keep track of how many pills or patches you have left in the bottle or package.
- If you think someone has taken your medicine, contact the police as soon as possible.



Questions for My Doctor

- Are opioid medicines right for my pain?
- How long will I need to take the medicine?
- Can I drink alcohol while taking this medicine?
- Can I drive while taking this medicine?
- What happens if I run out of the medicine?
- What should I do if the medicine does not help my pain?
- Will other medicines interact with this medicine?
- How can I safely stop taking the medicine?

For More Information

- **Medline Plus:** www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/magazine/issues/spring11/articles/spring11pg9.html
- **American Academy of Family Physicians:** <http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/drugs-procedures-devices/prescription-medicines/safeuse.html>

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