

Prescription Opioids

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WHAT are opioids

Prescription opioids are powerful pain-reducing medications that include prescription oxycodone (OxyContin, Percodan, Percocet), hydrocodone (Vicodin, Lortab, Lorcet), and morphine (Kadian, Avinza, MS Contin), among others, and have both benefits as well as potentially serious risks. Although they are very effective pain relievers, these medications are classified as narcotics and can be dangerous when abused. When used properly, opioids have long been known to help the severe pain that follows surgery and to alleviate the suffering of people with advanced cancer. More recently, morphine and similar drugs have been used to treat chronic pain not caused by cancer. For many people, they have been remarkably helpful; for others, it either hasn't worked or has created problems over time.

Taken as directed, opioids can manage pain effectively when used for a short amount of time. With long-term use, people need to be screened and monitored, because a fraction of those treated will develop an addiction disorder, abuse the drugs, or give them to others. Long-term daily use of opioids leads to physical dependence, which is not to be confused with addiction disorder. An addiction disorder occurs in about 5% of people who take these pain relievers as directed over the period of one year. An addiction disorder can be treated, but like those who misuse or illegally distribute prescription drugs, the prescriber needs to be vigilant to identify and address these problems. That is why everyone who uses prescription opioids needs to be screened and closely monitored.

WHO is prescribed opioids

Opioids are commonly prescribed because they are effective in relieving many types of pain. Opioids may be used short-term to manage pain associated with surgery, labor pain, breakthrough pain (defined as pain that arises despite the use of long-term pain relief medication), and intermittent pain (arising only every once in a while).

As noted, long-term opioid use may be necessary for some patients with chronic, severe pain. This type of opioid therapy is only prescribed if the expected benefits for your pain and function are expected to outweigh the risks. It is important to work with your healthcare provider to make sure you are getting the safest, most effective care.

Patient Education Handout

A service for patients

WHAT are the risks and side effects of opioid use

Prescription opioids carry serious risks of addiction and overdose, especially with prolonged use. In one study, 25% of patients receiving opioids from a primary care provider struggled with addiction. An opioid overdose, often marked by slowed breathing, can cause sudden death. The use of prescription opioids can have a number of side effects as well, even when taken as directed:

- Tolerance—meaning you might need to take more of a medication for the same pain relief
- Physical dependence—meaning you have symptoms of withdrawal when a medication is stopped
- Increased sensitivity to pain
- Constipation
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dry mouth
- Sleepiness
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Depression
- Low levels of testosterone that can result in lower sex drive, energy, and strength
- Itching and sweating

WHAT factors increase the risk of opioid side effects

The risks are greater if certain factors are present. This includes:

- History of drug misuse, substance use disorder, or overdose
- Mental health conditions (such as depression or anxiety)
- Sleep apnea
- Older age (65 years or older)
- Pregnancy

In addition, the use of alcohol and certain other medications can increase the risk of slowed breathing and overdose. So, you should always avoid alcohol while taking prescription opioids. Also, unless specifically advised by your healthcare provider, medications to avoid include:

- Benzodiazepines (such as Xanax or Valium)
- Muscle relaxants (such as Soma or Flexeril)
- Hypnotics (such as Ambien or Lunesta)
- Other prescription opioids

Do not take medicine unless it was prescribed for you. Do not stop taking your medicine without talking to your healthcare provider. Do not cut, break, chew, crush, dissolve, snort, or inject your medicine. If you cannot swallow your medicine whole, talk to your healthcare provider.

WHO should I contact if I have side effects

Call 911 or your local emergency service right away if:

- You take too much medicine
- You have trouble breathing or shortness of breath
- A child has taken one of your opioids

Talk to your healthcare provider:

- If the dose you are taking does not control your pain
- About any side effects you may be having
- About all the medicines you take, including over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and dietary supplements

HOW can I dispose of unneeded opioids

In some cases, you may have some opioids left after your pain resolves. In these cases, you should dispose of the drugs safely. It is important never to share your medication with others.

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, most medications that are no longer necessary or have expired should be removed from their containers, mixed with undesirable substances (e.g., cat litter, used coffee grounds), and put into an impermeable, nondescript container (e.g., disposable container with a lid or a sealed bag) before throwing in the trash. Any personal information should be obscured or destroyed. Certain medicines, including oxycodone/acetaminophen (Percocet), oxycodone (OxyContin tablets), and transdermal fentanyl (Duragesic Transdermal System), should be flushed down the toilet instead of thrown in the trash. Only flush prescription drugs down the toilet if the label or accompanying patient information specifically instructs doing so.

This information is reprinted from material provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

This handout is provided to you by NetCE and your healthcare provider. For more information, please consult your physician.

