

Opioids: Safe Use and Side Effects

Your doctor has prescribed an opioid (OH- pee-oyd). This drug can control moderate to severe pain without increased risk of bleeding and kidney problems. Always take the right dose at the right time. **Do not wait for pain to get worse before you take a dose.**

This drug and others of the same type are narcotics (nar-KOT-ix). Strict laws control their use. You break federal and state laws if you give or sell this drug to any other person.

Be careful when you drive or use any type of machine. The drug can affect your judgment and response time.

Use birth control and keep from getting pregnant. If you become pregnant, keep taking this drug as prescribed. Tell your doctor as soon as you find out you are pregnant.

Take the exact dose your doctor orders. Stay on a strict schedule if you can. If you skip a dose, it may be harder to get your pain back under control. If you take too much at a time or more often than prescribed, you risk severe side effects and death.

Side effects

Constipation is a common side effect when you take this type of drug. Exercise, change your diet and drink more fluid to ease this problem. Other side effects differ from person to person.

Common short-term effects include:

- Nausea (upset stomach)
- Sweating
- Itching
- Depression

The drug may affect how you breathe when you sleep (sleep apnea) or your level of male sex hormone (testosterone).

Interaction with other drugs and alcohol

For your safety, talk to the doctor who prescribes opioids for you before you take any other medicine. This includes:

- Drugs prescribed by other doctors
- Over-the-counter drugs for colds, coughs, headaches and other symptoms of illness or stress
- Herbal products
- Drinks or powders for weight loss or gain
- Drinks or powders for increased energy or strength
- Anti-anxiety drugs
- Sleeping pills

Never drink alcohol at any time while you are taking opioids. You risk your life when you drink

Drug tolerance

You rely on this drug to relieve pain that made you seek help from your doctor. Taking this drug does not make you an addict, but you should be aware of that risk. Use can become abuse if you do not take the drug just as your doctor says. (If you are taking this drug to manage pain for 2 to 4 weeks after surgery, chances of drug abuse are very slim.)

If you take this drug for chronic pain, your body may adapt to it as time goes by. This is called increased tolerance. You may need larger doses to get the same level of relief. Talk with your doctor if this happens. You might want to explore other methods of pain control.

Do not take a much smaller dose or stop taking the drug all at once. You are likely to have these withdrawal symptoms:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Pain in your belly (abdomen)
- Sweating
- Feeling anxious
- Not able to sleep
- Feeling restless (agitation)

Opioid-induced hyperalgesia (hy-per-al-JEE-zee-uh)

This odd problem may evolve slowly during long-term use of opioids. Sensitivity to pain may increase in one or both of these ways:

- Your pain may no longer be controlled.
- You may become super sensitive to a situation, substance or surface that has not hurt you in the past.

For either reason, you may need to stop taking opioids. Your doctor will talk with you about other drugs or pain control methods. Please contact your provider if you feel like you are having these symptoms. You may need to be seen in the clinic for an exam and review of symptoms.

Physical dependence

This may occur with many types of medicine – not just opioids. Physical dependence does not mean you are addicted. When you take the same medicine over and over, your body gets used to it. Organs and systems adapt to the medicine being present all the time. Body functions change in ways you do not notice. Discuss your concerns with your provider. Do not increase your medicine unless your provider tells you to do this.

Your body is likely to react if you stop taking the medicine all at once. You may feel sick to your stomach or have headaches and other symptoms. This is called withdrawal response. The withdrawal response to opioids differs from person to person. Please contact your provider if you feel like you are having these symptoms. You may need an exam and review of symptoms in the clinic. Your provider will decide if you are dependent and discuss your treatment options.

Warning signs of addiction

Addiction is a chronic disease. Your body and mind depend on a drug because of genetic, psychosocial and environmental factors. You may be addicted when one or more of these are true:

- You have little or no control over drug use.
- You take more of a drug than is prescribed
- You ask for early refills.
- You have prescriptions filled at more than one place.
- You use other substances that affect your mind or body.
- You crave the drug even though you know it can harm you.
- You forge prescriptions.
- You borrow or share drugs with others.

- You need to have prescriptions replaced because drugs have been “stolen.”

State and federal laws forbid your doctor to prescribe an opioid if you show any of these signs. In the course of your care, you will be asked for samples of your urine, breath, saliva, blood or hair. We are required by law to test these for the presence of drugs. Drug screens can be done on any day without advance warning. This is for your safety.

Set reasonable goals for pain control

Total freedom from pain may not be achieved with this or any drug. This is not a realistic goal. Even at high doses, a drug may not keep your pain at a level you can stand. Needing greater doses may mean you have a physical or mental addiction to the drug. Use of this drug to control your pain may have to end when one or more of these are true:

- You do not get enough pain relief to lead a normal daily life.
- Side effects do not go away after you adjust to the drug.
- You have not achieved treatment goals.
- You need or want higher doses.
- You cannot abide by terms of your treatment agreement.

Contact information

8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays

Call the number(s) written here by the staff member who reviews this handout with you

Department and clinic _____

(608) 775- _____ or

(800) 362-9567, ext. _____ or

(_____) _____

After hours, weekends and holidays

Telephone Nurse Advisor (608) 775-4454 or (800) 858-1050

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