



Taking Opioid Medicine for Chronic Pain

Talk to Your Doctor About What's Right for You

Doctors prescribe opioids to help control some types of pain. Common examples of opioids are:

- hydrocodone
- oxycodone
- morphine

These medicines are better known by their brand names: Vicodin, Percocet, Oxycontin, MS Contin.

Not all opioids are taken by mouth. For example, fentanyl (Duragesic) can be delivered through a skin patch.

When patients use opioids as their doctor tells them to, these drugs can reduce pain in some people.

But they may not work for everyone or work over the long term. In some cases, they lose their effectiveness over time or stop working altogether.

Scientists do not yet understand why opioids work for some people but not for others. Research is underway to try and understand this better.

While opioids may be helpful for **acute pain** (*pain that lasts no more than a few weeks*), there is no strong evidence that they work consistently for **chronic pain** (*pain that lasts over 3 months*). More research needs to be done to understand why.

If you have moderate or severe pain, taking opioids may help you do the things you like to do or need to do every day. But opioids don't treat what's causing your pain. They just help you to feel less pain. Most experts agree that completely getting rid of pain is not a realistic goal.

Many people have side effects from opioids. Some of these side effects are more serious than others. Also, some side effects may become less severe or go away after a short time. Tell your doctor about how opioids affect you.

Side effects and risks



What are possible side effects of taking opioids?

- Constipation (almost everyone will experience this)
- Sleepiness
- Sleep disturbance (non-refreshing “dream-like” sleep)
- Feeling confused
- Itching
- Nausea
- Feeling “high”
- Low blood pressure
- Slow or stopped breathing



What are some of the risks of taking opioids?

- **Tolerance.** It is likely that you will develop tolerance over time. *This means your body needs more of the drug for the same pain relief.*
- **Dependence.** It is also likely that you will become physically dependent if you take opioids for more than a few weeks. *This means your body has become used to the drug and you can experience unpleasant symptoms (diarrhea, muscle aches, nausea) if you stop taking it suddenly.*

This is called **withdrawal**. It does not mean that you are addicted. Getting off of opioids once you become dependent may be difficult and must be done gradually. But it can be done. There are medicines that can help you get off opioids if you become dependent. Your doctor can help you.

- **Addiction.** You may become addicted. Addiction is different than dependence. *It means that you are obsessed with taking opioids.* You can't stop taking the drug even though it may be having bad effects on you and your life. You crave the drug and make bad life decisions in order to obtain it.

People who are addicted may spend all their money and sacrifice relationships at home and work to satisfy their craving. Even after withdrawing from the drug, the cravings persist. Treatment of addiction usually requires counseling and medication.

- **Hyperalgesia.** Sometimes, people taking opioids to treat their pain become even more sensitive to certain kinds of pain. It may be the type of pain that's being treated or a different type of pain. Why this happens is not well understood.
- **Overdose and Death.** If you take too much of an opioid you could suffer a fatal overdose. Combining opioids with alcohol or certain other drugs is very dangerous and increases the risk of fatal overdose.

What factors can increase a person's risk of problems when taking opioids?

- Taking more of your opioid medicine than your doctor tells you to take.
- Taking opioids and also drinking alcohol.
- If you take other medicines, like anxiety medicine (for example, Xanax) or some types of sleeping medicine (for example, Ambien) or some types of allergy medicine (for example, Benadryl).
- It's hard to know how much of an opioid is needed to control pain and just how much a person would have to take to cause an overdose. Talk to your doctor about starting on a low dose. If you need to increase the dose, work with your doctor to do it slowly. Taking higher doses of opioids over longer periods of time may increase your risk of having problems.

Talking to your doctor



What should I tell my doctor to help us decide on the right treatment for my pain?

- ✓ Important details about your pain:
 - How strong is your pain?
 - When is your pain the worst?
 - When does your pain bother you the least?
 - In what ways does your pain interfere with everyday activities?
 - In what ways does your pain interfere with you enjoying life?
 - What helps your pain?
 - What makes your pain worse?
- ✓ What other medicines (prescription and over-the-counter), vitamins, or herbal remedies or supplements you take.
- ✓ If you have any chronic diseases (like heart or lung disease) or infectious diseases (like HIV).
- ✓ If you, or a family member, has a history of addiction with tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs.

You and Your Doctor Can Make a Decision about Treatment

1. Ask about your options
2. Talk about what's important to you
3. Discuss your decision



What questions should I ask my doctor if I'm prescribed opioid medicine?

- ✓ What are the side effects?
- ✓ Should I be prescribed a drug called Narcan that can be given if opioids cause me to stop breathing?
- ✓ What should I do if I have a side effect?
- ✓ Can I drink alcohol while taking this medicine?
- ✓ Can I drive while taking this medicine?
- ✓ What should I do if I forget to take this medicine when I'm supposed to?
- ✓ What happens if I run out of the medicine?
- ✓ How long will I need to take this medicine?
- ✓ Can I safely stop taking this medicine?
- ✓ Are there other medicines that I shouldn't take while taking this medicine?



Pain treatment options



How do I know if taking an opioid medicine is the right choice to treat my pain?

- If your pain levels decrease enough to allow you to be more productive in your daily life at work and home.
- If the side effects do not interfere with your ability to achieve your activity goals.

After you consider these factors, discuss them with your doctor who can help you decide whether opioids are right for you.

Are there other ways to treat pain?

Yes. Opioids are not for treating every type of pain. They may not be the best way to treat some types of long-term pain, such as arthritis pain, low back pain, or frequent headaches. But there are other options that may work.

Other Ways to Help Treat Pain that Don't Involve Taking Opioids

Here are some other things that might help keep your pain under control:

- Heating pads or cold packs
- Over-the-counter medicine: acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), naproxen (Aleve)
- Prescription medicine: antidepressants, anti-seizure medications
- Exercise and stretching
- Sleep
- Meditation or relaxation training
- Physical therapy
- Massage
- Acupuncture
- Seeing a chiropractor
- Counseling or cognitive behavioral therapy

Ask your doctor if these, or other options, could work for you on their own or in addition to taking opioids.

This fact sheet is not a substitute for professional medical advice.