

Opioid Pain Medications

- Information for patients and families

Why do I need to take an opioid pain medication?

You have been prescribed an opioid pain medicine to help reduce your pain so that you are able to do your day-to-day activities. Opioid pain medications will not reduce your pain to zero. Opioids are also called narcotics. This handout reviews some important safety information about opioids.

Patients, family, friends and caregivers can play an important role in the safe use of these medications. Please share this information with them.

Your goal is finding a balance

With opioids, there is a fine balance between effectively controlling your pain and preventing an overdose.



If you need opioids for more than 1 to 2 weeks, make sure that you understand your plan for pain control and work closely with your health care provider.

Risk of overdose and addiction

Many people have used opioids without problems. However, serious problems, including overdose and addiction, have happened. It is important to follow the instructions on the prescription and use the **lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time**, and to be aware of signs that you are getting too much opioid.

Avoid alcohol and benzodiazepines (such as lorazepam (Ativan®), alprazolam (Xanax®), temazepam (Restoril®)).

Signs of an overdose

Stop taking the medication and get medical help if you have:

- severe dizziness
- inability to stay awake
- hallucinations
- heavy or unusual snoring
- slow breathing rate

Your family member or caregiver needs to call 911 if:

- you cannot speak clearly when you wake up
- they cannot wake you up
- your lips or fingernails are blue or purple
- you are making unusual heaving snoring, gasping, gurgling or snorting sounds while sleeping
- you are not breathing or have no heartbeat

Never leave a person alone if you are worried about them.
Ask about take home naloxone kits.

Side effects of opioid pain medication

Constipation, nausea, dry mouth, itchiness, sweating and dizziness can happen often with opioids. Contact your doctor or pharmacist if your side effects are hard to manage.

Your ability to drive or operate machinery may be impaired.

Some people are more sensitive to the side effects of opioids and may need a lower starting dose or more careful monitoring. Talk to your doctor about the higher risk of dangerous side effects if:

- you have certain health conditions such as:
 - sleep apnea, lung disease (such as COPD or asthma)
 - kidney or liver problems
- you have never taken opioids before
- you are already taking an opioid or medications for anxiety or to help you sleep
- you have a history of problems with alcohol or other substances
- you have had a bad reaction to an opioid before
- you are over 65 years of age

Safe keeping

Never share your opioid medicine with anyone. Store it securely in your home. Take any unused opioids back to your pharmacy for safe disposal.

Questions?

Ask your pharmacist if you have any questions. There are other options available to treat pain.