



Pain and prescriptions

Pain medications, including narcotic medications known as opioid pain relievers, can be safe and effective when used correctly. These drugs provide relief of severe pain resulting from surgeries, from injuries or trauma, and from illnesses. However, misuse of these drugs can be quite dangerous and can even prove deadly in certain circumstances.

Nearly three out of four prescription drug overdoses today are caused by prescription painkillers. Using prescription painkillers safely

Using prescription painkillers safely

If you've been prescribed pain relief medications, it's vital that you follow your health care professional's instructions carefully and to the letter. Here are helpful guidelines to follow.

Keep your doctor informed. Tell your health care professional about all other medicines that you are currently taking. This includes prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements. Also tell your provider about any past history of substance abuse on your part. All patients treated with opioids for pain require careful monitoring by their health care professional for signs of possible abuse and addiction, and to determine when these analgesics are no longer needed.

- Do not change the dose of your pain relief medication without talking to your doctor first.

- Keep your doctor informed about how your pain is responding to the drug, and whether you're experiencing any side effects of the medication.
- Don't ever share prescription pain medications with another person. Only a licensed health care professional can determine if a prescription pain medication is appropriate and safe for someone.
- Keep in mind that the dose of an opioid pain medication that is safe for you could be high enough to cause an overdose and death in someone else, especially a child. So it's very important to store these medications in a place where they cannot be accidentally accessed or stolen.
- Since the use of opioids can lead to drowsiness, it's important not to drive or use any machinery that may injure you, especially when you first start the medication.
- Opioids can have other significant side effects including constipation and depressed breathing, depending on the amount of medication taken. Remember that taking too much of the drug could cause severe respiratory depression or death.
- Also, do not crush or break the pills. This can change the rate at which the medication is absorbed by the body, and can lead to overdose and death.
- Avoid the risk of drug interactions. Avoid mixing opioids with alcohol, antihistamines, barbiturates, or benzodiazepines without speaking to your provider first. All of these substances slow breathing. Their combined effects could lead to life-threatening respiratory depression.

The risk of dependence and addiction to opioids

When you are taking opioid medications for pain, you can become tolerant to them. This means that you seem to need more of the drug to relieve your pain. This is a common side effect of prescribed opioid medication.

It's also possible to become dependent on opioids. In this case the user feels sick if there are no opioids in the body, as when abruptly discontinuing the drug. This sickness is known as withdrawal. Symptoms of withdrawal can include nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, sleeplessness, restlessness, tremors, abdominal cramps, bone and muscle aches, and craving for the drug. If you suffer withdrawal symptoms after discontinuing use of an opioid, it's important to talk with your health care provider.

It's also possible to develop an addiction to opioid painkillers—which is a condition more destructive than dependence on the drugs. When someone is addicted to the drugs, their drug use is compulsive and continues even when it causes harm to them. Once a narcotic addiction has developed, escaping the cycle of detoxification from the drug and relapse (resuming use) is typically a long-term process requiring specialized treatment.

It's important to be aware of the potential risks to your health and well-being from misuse of prescription painkillers, so follow your doctor's instructions carefully, and be sure to contact him or her if you recognize the presence of any of the health problems described in this document.

Additional resources

National Institute on Drug Abuse

www.drugabuse.gov/publications/researchreports/prescription-drugs/opioids/what-are-opioids

Family Doctor

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseasesconditions/opioid-addiction.html>

Drugfree.org

www.drugfree.org

Contact Us

Your program provides access to tools and other resources online or call us directly to speak to a professional counselor who is available everyday and at any time to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.

Sources: U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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