

Opioids

UNDERSTANDING Opioid Medicines for Pain Management

OPIOIDS ARE MEDICINES THAT CAN HELP REDUCE MODERATE TO SEVERE PAIN. While they can be safe and effective when used correctly, the risks and possible side effects of their use are serious. For this reason, opioids should be considered only if other medicines or treatments have not done enough to control your pain.

Opioids are stronger than most over-the-counter pain relievers. Because of this, they must be prescribed by a healthcare provider. You and your provider will work together to decide if opioids are the right pain management choice for you. When considering opioid medicines as part of a pain management plan, be sure you understand the benefits, risks, and side effects. Ask questions and discuss concerns before starting and at any point during your opioid treatment. This booklet also can help you learn about the safe use of opioids. Inside you'll find:

- ▶ How opioids work to reduce pain
- ▶ Common risks and side effects of opioids
- ▶ Warning signs of an opioid overdose
- ▶ How to make a treatment plan with your healthcare provider
- ▶ How to use, store, and dispose of opioid medicines safely

Know Your Options

Keep in mind that opioids are not the only way to treat pain. Other options may work just as well and have fewer risks and side effects. Non-opioid options can include:

- Other pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen or naproxen
- Other classes of medicines, such as anticonvulsants, antidepressants, and muscle relaxers
- Exercise and physical therapy
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (which can help you learn different ways to respond to and cope with pain)
- Mind/body therapies, such as deep breathing, distraction, visualization, meditation, and biofeedback
- Complementary therapies, such as massage, acupuncture and acupressure, and chiropractic care
- Various procedures, such as transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), implantation of a spinal pump, and nerve ablation

What Is Pain?

Pain is the body's way of telling you something is wrong. It makes you pull your hand away from a flame or avoid walking on an injured leg. Pain starts in receptor cells found beneath the skin and in organs throughout the body. When you are sick or injured, these receptors send signals along nerve pathways

to the spinal cord, which then sends the signals to the brain. The brain interprets these signals as pain. In response, it sends back signals to protect the body. The brain also releases its own natural painkillers (called endorphins) to help reduce pain. Once the source of the pain goes away or the body heals, the pain usually stops.

How Opioids Work

Opioids work by attaching to the receptor cells. When opioids attach to receptors, they can block or suppress how you feel pain. Opioids can also make you feel good or relaxed by affecting areas of the brain that produce feelings of pleasure.

TYPES OF OPIOIDS

There are two types of opioids: short-acting/immediate-release (SA/IR) and long-acting/extended-release (LA/ER). Short-acting opioids work faster than long-acting types, but provide pain relief for a shorter time. Long-acting opioids work slower than short-acting ones, but provide pain relief for longer. Many opioids come in both short- and long-acting forms. Some examples of opioids include:

- Codeine with acetaminophen
- Fentanyl
- Hydrocodone (with or without acetaminophen)
- Hydromorphone
- Meperidine
- Methadone
- Morphine
- Oxycodone
- Oxycodone with naloxone
- Tramadol

If you are prescribed opioids, you will usually be started on a short-acting type at the lowest dosage. The dosage may then be adjusted based on your response to the medicine.

Opioids

for pain management

Risks & Side Effects

Forming an OPIOID TREATMENT PLAN

Medicine SAFETY



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Risks are stronger than most over-the-counter pain relievers. Because of this, they must be prescribed by a healthcare provider. You and your provider will work together to decide if opioids are the right pain management choice for you. When considering opioid medicines as part of a pain management plan, be sure you understand the benefits, risks, and side effects. Ask questions and discuss concerns before starting and at any point during your opioid treatment. This booklet also can help you learn about the safe use of opioids inside you'll find:

- How opioids work to reduce pain
- Common risks and side effects of opioids
- Warning signs of an opioid overdose
- How to make a treatment plan with your healthcare provider
- How to use, store, and dispose of opioid medicines safely

Know Your Options

Keep in mind that opioids are not the only way to treat pain. Other options may work just as well and have fewer risks and side effects. Non-opioid options can include:

- Other pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen or naproxen
- Other classes of medicines, such as antidepressants, anticonvulsants, and muscle relaxers
- Exercise and physical therapy
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (which can help you learn different ways to respond to and cope with pain)
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What Is Pain?

Pain is the body's way of telling you something is wrong. It makes you pull your hand away from a flame or avoid walking on an injured leg. Pain starts in receptor cells found beneath the skin and in organs throughout the body. When you are sick or injured, these receptors send signals along nerve pathways to the spinal cord, which then sends the signals to the brain. The brain interprets these signals as pain. In response, it sends back signals to protect the body. The brain also releases its own natural painkillers called endorphins to help reduce pain. Once the source of the pain goes away or your body heals, the pain usually stops.

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TYPES OF OPIOIDS

There are two types of opioids: short acting/immediate release (SAR) and long acting/extended release (LAR). Short acting opioids work faster than long acting types, but provide pain relief for a shorter time. Long acting opioids work slower than short acting ones, but provide pain relief for longer. Many opioids come in both short- and long-acting forms. Some examples of opioids include:

- Oxycodone with acetaminophen
- Fentanyl
- Hydrocodone (with or without acetaminophen)
- Morphine
- Oxycodone
- Oxycodone with naloxone
- Tramadol

If you are prescribed opioids, you will usually be started on a short-acting type of the lowest dosage. The dosage may then be adjusted based on your response to the medicine.



Risks & Side Effects of Opioid Medicines

IF TAKEN AS PRESCRIBED, OPIOIDS ARE USUALLY SAFE AND CAN HELP MANAGE PAIN. But they do come with risks and side effects that are important to understand. Of the risks that can occur, opioid overdose (taking too much) is the most serious. For this reason, it is critical that you and your loved ones understand the signs and symptoms of opioid overdose and know what to do if it occurs.

Risks of Opioid Medicines
If you take opioids regularly for a long period of time, there is a risk of forming a tolerance or dependence to the medicines. There is also the risk of forming an addiction. But this is much less common when opioids are taken as directed under the care of a healthcare provider. Understanding the differences between these risks helps you know what to expect when taking opioids and what to do if addiction is suspected.

Tolerance means that your body needs higher amounts than before to achieve the same pain-relief effects. Most people who take opioids for longer than a few weeks form a tolerance. This is normal. Your provider will help you manage tolerance and ensure that your pain is controlled.

Dependence means you will have withdrawal symptoms if you reduce or stop taking the medicine. Symptoms can include sleeplessness, rapid heartbeat, rigid bowing, and diarrhea. Forming a dependence is common for people taking opioids regularly for a long period of time, but it is not the same thing as addiction. When it is time to stop using the opioids, your healthcare provider will work with you to reduce the amount of medicine over time. This lessens withdrawal symptoms.

Addiction occurs when a person has the urge to seek out the medicine and cannot stop using it despite the harms that it might cause. Some people, such as those who have a history of drug misuse, are at higher risk for addiction. Your healthcare provider will monitor you regularly for signs of addiction. If you suspect that you are forming an addiction, call your provider right away.

Side Effects of Opioid Medicines

Some side effects are common when taking opioids. These include constipation, nausea, sleepiness, impaired motor skills, and urinary retention (problems emptying the bladder). Opioid medicines can also cause problems with memory, thinking, and judgment, especially in older adults. If you have any of these side effects, talk with your healthcare provider or pharmacist. They can provide advice for managing them.

In some cases, your provider may need steps to prevent side effects that are likely to occur. For instance, to help prevent constipation, your provider may prescribe a laxative or stool softener at the same time you start opioid treatment.

WHAT IS OPIOID-USE DISORDER?

Opioid use disorder is a risk of taking opioid medicines. It may be diagnosed if someone shows a pattern of using opioids despite negative effects such as:

- The opioid interfering with his, her, or work
- The opioid causing physical or psychological problems
- Continued and increased time trying to obtain opioids, using them, and recovering from their use
- Unsuccessful attempts to cut down or stop opioid use
- Using a higher amount of opioid than prescribed or using it in unsafe situations (such as when driving)
- Unmanaged signs and symptoms of tolerance or withdrawal

If opioid use disorder is suspected, contact a healthcare provider immediately. They can assess the problem and provide treatment if needed.

Risk for Overdose

Opioids affect the part of the brain that controls breathing. An opioid overdose can slow and even stop a person's breathing. This can be fatal. Call 911 right away any time an overdose is suspected.

Key signs and symptoms of opioid overdose are:

- Pupils appear (narrowing of dark circles in the middle of eyes)
- Slow or stopped breathing
- Unconsciousness (person passes out and does not respond)

Other signs and symptoms include:

- Limp body
- Pink face
- Cherry red skin
- Purple or blue color of the lips and fingernails
- Vomiting

Your healthcare provider may prescribe a medicine called naloxone to help to treat this. It is to be used in case of opioid overdose. When given within a certain period of time after an overdose, naloxone can help reverse the life-threatening effects of the opioid. Emergency care will be needed.