

Opioids: What you need to know

About dosing, duration and tapering



Has your doctor prescribed opioid medication for pain? It's very important to follow your provider's instructions on the dosage and length of time you should continue taking them. However, it's also important that you understand some basics about your medication to help make sure you're using them safely.

Opioids are often given for acute pain. Acute pain is short-term pain. It may be caused by an injury, surgery or dental work.

Some people have chronic pain – pain that they live with on a daily, ongoing basis. When opioids are taken over a long period of time, the risks of becoming dependent on them increases greatly. And long-term use can also lead to addiction.

First, understand that there are other options besides opioids. Talk to your doctor about these options. Some of them may actually work better than opioids. They also have fewer risks and side effects.

Options include:

- Over-the-counter pain relievers such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and naproxen
- Physical therapy and exercise
- Certain medications used to treat depression and seizures
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (talk therapy)

The health care provider's responsibilities

- Work closely with you to discuss a plan for treating your pain. The plan should focus on limiting opioid use and include a plan for stopping
- Discuss the risks of opioid medications
- Only prescribe opioids if the benefits are greater than the risks
- Prescribe the lowest possible dose, for the shortest time
- Take your health history to identify possible risk factors
- Test your urine to make sure you aren't already taking opioids or other dangerous drugs
- Follow up with you while you're taking them
- Check your state's prescription drug monitoring program to make sure you aren't taking opioids or other drugs prescribed by another doctor

Your responsibilities

If you and your provider decide that opioid medication is right for you, follow these important rules:

- Never take more medication than prescribed or more often than directed.
- Make sure you understand the possible risks and side effects.
- Never share opioids with other people. Never sell them. This is illegal.
- Never use another person's prescription medication.
- Keep medication in a secure place where others can't find it.
- Know that even small amounts of opioids can be fatal for children and pets.

Your treatment plan

You and your provider should make a plan together about dealing with your pain. Your goals should include improving your pain, ability to function and quality of life.

How much? How long?

- Your doctor should always prescribe the lowest possible dose of any opioid. This will usually be less than 50 MME. "MME" stands for "morphine milligram equivalent." It is a way doctors can easily compare how strong different opioids are and how much to prescribe. Doses higher than 50 MME increase the risk of bad side effects and could cause overdose.
- For acute pain, you should only get enough medication to last three days or less. In some cases you may get seven days' worth.
- Your doctor should give you written instructions on how to taper off (cut back little by little) so you don't have withdrawal symptoms. Withdrawal can happen if you have taken opioids around the clock for more than 7 days and stop suddenly.

To avoid possible misuse of opioid medication — which could lead to addiction, overdose, or even death — you should always:

- Work closely with your health care provider.
- Follow all of your provider's instructions on taking the medication.
- Keep the medication out of reach of others.

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Sources

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Updated September, 2017

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