

Opioid Treatment Fact Sheet

Using opioid medicines to treat your pain

You and your doctor have decided that opioid pain medicine might help reduce your pain and improve your function. Opioids are not likely to make your pain go away completely.

It is important to understand that this treatment involves potential risks and benefits. It is also important that you follow the guidelines in this handout and let your doctor know what you expect from your treatment. Your doctor may ask you to sign an Opioid Patient Care Agreement

What are the goals and possible benefits of opioid treatment?

The goals of treatment are to reduce your pain and improve your daily function. The benefits of opioid medicines are different from person to person. Opioids typically reduce chronic pain by about 30%. Some people find that they can function better day to day, but research has shown that this is not typical.

Experts agree that opioids may actually make pain worse, especially at high doses. “Flare-ups” are common and should not usually be treated by increasing the dose or taking extra medicine.

Your doctor will monitor how you are doing by asking you to rate your pain level and your daily functioning. He or she may want to know how far you can walk, how long you can sit, if you are able to work or do housework, and what kinds of activities you do alone or with family and friends.

What are the common side effects and risks of opioids?

Opioids cause common side effects that can be unpleasant. They can also increase risks of serious health effects that occur less often. Because opioids have risks that can be serious, your doctor may ask you for a urine or blood sample to help protect your safety.

Side effects vary from person to person. You and your doctor will work together to monitor how opioids affect you. Your doctor may need to adjust your dose until you find the right balance between pain reduction, improved function, and side effects.

It is normal to develop physical dependence to opioids. Physical dependence means your body has adapted to the medicine and you will experience tolerance and withdrawal. Tolerance means you need to take more of the medicine to get the same effect. Withdrawal means you will have symptoms when you stop using the medicine. Withdrawal symptoms are usually the opposite of the effects of the medicine. For example, if the medicine causes constipation, the withdrawal symptom would be diarrhea. If the medicine reduces pain, the symptom would be increased pain. Withdrawal from opioids is temporary and usually not dangerous.

Babies born to mothers taking opioids will be dependent on opioids at birth. You should not take opioids if you are trying to get pregnant. If you do get pregnant while taking opioids, let your doctor know right away.

People who have had problems with mental health, drugs, or alcohol are more likely to have problems with opioids. You must tell your doctor about any mental illness, substance abuse, or addiction of any type have experienced in the past. You must also tell your doctor if anyone in your family has had these problems. Research shows these problems sometimes run in families.

Experts agree that people with active substance abuse or addiction problems should not use opioids for chronic non-cancer pain. If you have problems with substance abuse or addiction, it is important to let your doctor know so you can get the help you need. Tell your doctor right away if you feel you are becoming addicted to opioids.

Common side effects

Constipation

Opioid medicines cause constipation. You may need to be treated for this while you are taking opioids.

Sedation

Many opioid medications can make you feel drowsy, slow your reaction time, and cause loss of coordination. They can also make it hard to concentrate and think clearly.

Do not drive or use dangerous equipment until you are sure that opioids do not affect your reaction time or thinking ability. It may take a week or longer before you know if you can drive safely while taking opioids. If you are in a traffic accident while driving on opioids, you may be considered to be “driving under the influence” (DUI).

Other side effects and withdrawal symptoms

Other Side Effects	Withdrawal Symptoms
Rash and/or itching	Sweating
Dry eyes	Nausea
Blurred vision	Abdominal pain/cramping
Nausea and vomiting	Diarrhea
Inability to urinate	Trouble sleeping
Low blood pressure	Muscle aches
Slow heart beat	Fast heart beat
Depressed mood	Anxiety
Slowed breathing	Runny nose
Problems with balance	“Goose bumps”
Decreased sex drive (decreased testosterone)	
Decreased immune function	
Swelling in hands and feet	
Jerking of arms and legs	
Increased sensitivity to pain	
Disruption of normal sleep	
Dental problems	
Apathy	
Falls resulting in fractures	

Risk of serious bodily harm or death

Opioid pain medicines can cause serious bodily harm or death. Higher doses appear to cause more side effects, some of which can lead to injuries like serious fractures due to falls. Higher doses increase the risk of overdose. An overdose of opioids, whether by accident or on purpose, can cause serious bodily harm or death. Research continues to show more and more problems with long-term opioid use, especially at high doses.

Using more opioids than your doctor prescribes can cause you to become dangerously sedated, to stop breathing, or to overdose. Combining opioids with certain other medicines or with alcohol or drugs can have the same effect.

Some opioids have higher risks

There are special problems with some opioids. For example, meperidine (Demerol) and tramadol (Ultram) are associated with increased seizure risk. Methadone stays in the body for many days, which increases the risk of overdose. It can also cause heart rhythm problems. Opioids, that contain acetaminophen, such as Vicodin and Percocet, can harm the liver when taken long term or at high doses.

Are there alternatives to opioid treatment for chronic non-cancer pain?

Your doctor may prescribe other treatments to help your pain and to help you do daily activities better. These may include exercise, psychological counseling, and medicines that are not opioids. Please be sure to discuss these options with your doctor.

Questions?

Please ask your doctor any questions you have about taking opioids.