

Opioid Medication for Chronic Pain

What are opioid pain medications?

Opioid medications are strong prescription medications that change the way your brain handles pain signals. (They are sometimes called “narcotic” medications, but when prescribed by a doctor they are called opioid medications or just “opioids.”)

Examples include morphine (MS Contin, Kadian), hydrocodone (Norco, Lortab, Vicodin), and oxycodone (Oxycontin, Roxicodone). Sometimes an opioid is combined with another type of pain reliever, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) in the same pill.

The goal of opioid medication is to reduce your pain so you can function better at work, exercise, and in personal relationships. On average, opioid medication can reduce pain by about 30% to 40%.

Are there risks to taking opioid pain medication?

Used as directed, opioid pain medication can be safe and effective. However, it can also pose some risks and potential dangers:

- **Opioids can interact in a dangerous way** with alcohol, recreational drugs, or certain medications.
- **Opioids can cause various side effects.** (See page 2 for a full list.)
 - **The most common side effect is constipation.** Most patients need to drink extra water and take fiber, laxatives, or stool softeners.
 - **The most serious side effect is decreased breathing** (also called respiratory depression), which can be deadly. Page 2 explains how to avoid this side effect and how to get help if it happens.



- **There may be risks with taking opioid medication in pregnancy.** Talk to your doctor.
- **If you take opioid medication for long periods of time, you can develop a tolerance** so it is less effective. If this happens, your doctor may need to change the dose or medication.
- **If you stop the medication suddenly, you may have withdrawal symptoms.** See page 4.
- **Opioid therapy poses a risk of addiction or abuse.** Addiction is the compulsive use of a medication, even if it causes harm. Abuse is using a medication for non-medical purposes (such as getting “high”). Addiction and abuse are common and treatable disorders. **This risk is low in the general population,** but it may be higher in young people, smokers, and people with a variety of risk factors. See page 4.

There are good ways to manage these risks. Your doctor will work with you to increase your safety and help you get the most benefit from the medication.

This handout explains how to take opioid medication wisely, and the steps your doctor may take to manage your risks. It also explains how to store and dispose of opioids safely.

Talking with your doctor about opioid pain medications

The table below lists the most common potential benefits, risks, and alternatives for taking opioid pain medication for chronic pain. There may be other benefits or risks in your unique medical situation. Talking with your doctor is the most important way to learn about the risks and benefits before starting any treatment or medication. If you have questions, be sure to ask them.

Potential benefits	Risks and potential complications	Alternatives
<p>Opioid pain medication can reduce your pain so you can function better at work, school, home, and in relationships.</p> <p>The goal for opioid therapy is to reduce your pain by 30% to 40%.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Side effects of opioid medication can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Constipation, the most common side effect (see page 1) – Decreased breathing, the most serious side effect (see the panel on breathing problems below) – Sleepiness, tiredness, and/or dizziness – Itching and/or sweating – Nausea, vomiting, and/or dry mouth – Slower reactions (physical and mental) that can reduce alertness or judgment – Depression, feeling generally “low,” feeling “high,” and/or seeing or hearing things that aren’t there – Difficulty urinating – Low levels of testosterone (a hormone); low levels can result in lower sex drive, energy, strength, or bone mass – Altered taste, vision, heart rate, and/or blood pressure – Shaking and/or twitching – Becoming more sensitive to pain • Risks of opioid medication include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Developing a tolerance, so the medication doesn’t work as well – Withdrawal symptoms if the medication is stopped suddenly (see page 4) – Addiction or abuse (see page 1) – Potential risks in pregnancy (talk to your doctor to find out more) 	<p>Depending on your pain condition, alternatives to opioid pain medication can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-opioid medications that reduce pain • Physical or occupational therapy • Psychological counseling • Relaxation techniques • Support groups • Exercise, weight loss, or other lifestyle changes • Medical procedures such as injections <p>See page 4 for more details. These strategies can also be used along with opioid medication.</p>

More about decreased breathing

Opioid therapy can decrease your breathing, especially during sleep. This problem, called **respiratory depression**, can cause sudden death. Respiratory depression is more common in patients with obesity, sleep apnea, or lung disease. It’s also more common in patients on higher doses of opioids, or who use opioids with alcohol, sleeping pills, anxiety medications, or some other medications.

Medications that interact with opioids to decrease breathing include clonazepam (Klonopin), alprazolam (Xanax), lorazepam (Ativan), zolpidem (Ambien), antihistamines (such as Benadryl), anti-nausea medications (such as promethazine/Phenergan), and muscle relaxants (such as carisoprodol/Soma).

- **Tell your doctor about ALL medications you take**, including over-the-counter drugs.
- **Tell your doctor** if you have any of these signs associated with sleep apnea: pauses in breathing during sleep, snoring, high blood pressure, or tiredness during the day.
- **Tell those you live with that you are starting a medication that can affect your breathing.** Ask them to watch for decreased breathing or the inability to wake up.
- **If breathing problems happen, they should call 911.** Healthcare providers can inject a medication to reverse the problem.

Before you start taking opioid pain medication

Before you start taking opioid medication, talk to your doctor and pharmacist. Follow these tips:

- **Tell your doctor about all the medications you take.** Bring a list of the prescriptions, vitamins and herbal pills you take. This helps your doctor make sure your pain medication doesn't combine with your other medicines in a bad way.
- **Talk with your doctor about your goals for reducing your pain and functioning better.** You and your doctor can make sure the medication is helping you meet these goals. If not, your doctor can try a different medication or strategy.
- **Talk with your doctor about your prescription.** Ask questions. Be sure you understand what you're taking, why you're taking it, and how to take it. Ask your doctor about the benefits, risks, and alternatives (see page 2).
- **At the pharmacy, make sure you understand the directions.** Read the directions on the bottle and see if they make sense to you. If they don't, ask the pharmacist to explain.

While you're taking the medication

Take opioid pain medication safely by following these tips:

- **Do NOT take more medication than your doctor ordered.** Even on days you feel worse, NEVER take a higher dose. NEVER take the medication more often.
- **Do NOT take sleep aids, anti-anxiety medication, or other pain relievers (not even Tylenol)** while taking prescription pain medication, without your doctor's permission.
- **NEVER drink alcohol or take illicit, illegal, or recreational drugs** while taking the medication.
- **Do NOT drive a car or operate dangerous machinery** until you know how the medication affects you. Opioids can slow your reflexes and affect your judgment. If you drive unsafely, opioids can be reason for you to receive a DUI charge (driving under the influence).

- **Do NOT share your pain medication.** Don't give a pill to a friend or family member, even if that person is in pain. Sharing pain medication is illegal. If someone is in severe pain, they need to see a doctor.
- **Lock up your pain medication.** Use a cabinet or drawer with a lock on it. Keep track of how many pills you have. This can prevent others from using the medication (see the panel below).
- **Keep the medication in the bottle it came in.** The label gives you the information you need, and the bottle protects the pills from light. Also, if you travel with the medication, airline security rules require you to have it in the original bottle.
- **Keep track of your medication so you don't run out suddenly.** Stay in touch with your doctor.

Dispose of unused medication

Get rid of unused medication in one of these ways:

- **Drop it off at a drug collection site — this is the best option.** Check with your police department, or check for a current list of collection sites at useonlyasdirected.org/safe-disposal-drop-off-locator

Why should you lock up pain medication — and get rid of unused medication?

- **Pain medication can be very dangerous if taken when it was not prescribed.** It should not be used for sleep, coughs, or anything it wasn't prescribed to treat. NEVER share prescription medication with anyone, not even family members.
- **Unused pills can tempt others.** One in five teens report using someone else's prescription drugs, often getting them from the medicine cabinet at home or a friend's house. Experimenting with prescription medication can lead to other drug abuse, including heroin addiction. Unused medication can also make you a target for robbery.

How your doctor may monitor your risks

To help keep you safe, your doctor will help you manage the risks of long-term opioid medication. Your doctor may do this in various ways:

- **Identifying factors that may increase your risk.** Research shows certain factors increase your risk of opioid misuse or addiction. Examples include a history of drug or alcohol abuse and certain mental health conditions. Your doctor may talk with you about these factors, ask you to fill out a form about them, or both. It's important to be honest with your doctor about this information. If you have higher risk, your doctor can take steps to help prevent problems.
- **Creating a plan.** Your doctor may ask you to sign an agreement that spells out a plan for managing risk and keeping you safe, while getting most benefit from the medication.
- **Scheduling follow-up visits.** Your doctor will set up regular visits to check how you're doing. Your doctor may sometimes ask you to bring your medication to check the amount you have.
- **Having urine tests.** Your doctor may check the medication levels in your system from time to time.

Other ways to manage your pain

Taking your medication as directed is an important part of your pain management. But it's not a good idea to rely on medication alone to manage your pain. Your doctor will work with you to choose other strategies to try as well. Examples include:

- **Relaxation.** This can include meditation, deep breathing, listening to music, or other strategies.
- **Physical or occupational therapy.** Your doctor may refer you to a specialist for these therapies. Physical therapy can reduce pain and help you regain movement and strength. Occupational therapy can give you strategies to live better despite a certain amount of pain.

- **Exercise, healthy eating, and other lifestyle changes.** Depending on your situation, your doctor may recommend some lifestyle changes that can reduce your pain over time.
- **Medical procedures, such as injections or surgery.** Depending on your condition, your doctor may refer you to a specialist for evaluation.
- **Emotional or spiritual support.** Talking with a counselor, friend, or support group can help you manage pain.
- **Psychological counseling.** Your doctor may also refer you to a psychologist to build coping skills and deal with issues that can be caused by pain.
- **Alternative therapies.** For some pain conditions, alternative therapies such as acupuncture can be helpful. If you try any of these on your own, be sure to keep your doctor informed.

What about withdrawal?

If opioid medication is stopped suddenly, you can have withdrawal symptoms. These can include cramps, diarrhea, body aches, increased pain, restlessness, yawning, runny nose, goose bumps, fast heartbeat, and sweating. These symptoms are uncomfortable, but in most cases they are not dangerous.

To avoid withdrawal symptoms:

- Do not stop taking opioid medication suddenly. Keep track of your medication so you don't run out without warning.
- When it's time to stop taking the medication, your doctor will help you taper off your dosage gradually.