Intermountain® Healthcare

Opioid Medication for Short-term Pain

What is opioid pain medication?

Pain medication helps control pain so you can sleep, move, and heal. One type of prescription pain medication is **opioid medication.** (It is also sometimes called "narcotic" medication, but when prescribed by a doctor it is called "opioid.") Opioids are strong medications that affect the way your brain handles pain signals. If you have short-term pain (lasting a few days to a few weeks) from an illness or injury, your doctor might prescribe opioid medication to help you manage it.

Opioid pain medications are safe and effective when used as directed. However, they can be dangerous if you don't use them as directed, or combine them with certain substances. Also, opioid medications can be very dangerous, even deadly, if they are taken by someone else.

This fact sheet explains how to use opioid medication wisely and safely.

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 your other medication.** 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 anything else in a bad way.
- **Talk to your doctor about the prescription.** Ask questions. Be sure you understand what you're taking, why you're taking it, and how to take it.
- **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

- **Do NOT take more pain medication than directed.** Even on days you feel worse, do not take a higher dose than your doctor ordered, and do not take it more often.
- **Do NOT take sleep aids, anti-anxiety medication, or other pain relievers** (not even Tylenol) without your doctor's permission.
- **Do NOT drink alcohol or use recreational drugs** while taking opioid pain medication.
- **Do NOT drive a car or use dangerous machinery** until you know how the medication affects you.
- **Do NOT share your pain medication.** Don't give a pill to a friend or family member, even if the person is in pain. Sharing pain medication is illegal and dangerous.
- **Lock up your pain medication.** Use a lockbox, a cabinet, or a drawer with a lock on it. Also, keep track of how many pills you have.
- **Keep the medication in the bottle it came in.** The label has information you need.
- **Watch for side effects.** See the next page.
- **Take the medication only as long as you need it.** When the pain resolves, stop taking the medication. To avoid side effects that can happen when you stop suddenly, you may want to "taper off" the dosage for a few days.

Two side effects to watch for

Opioid medication can cause various side effects. Your healthcare provider can give you details. Particularly, watch for these side effects:

- **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. Alcohol and some other medications can combine with opioids to make this problem worse. Ask those you live with to watch for decreased breathing or the inability to wake up. If this happens, they should call 911.

When you finish taking opioids

When you have finished taking opioid pain medication, get rid of it. Use one of these methods:

- **Drop pain medication off at a drug collection site.** This is the best option. Check with your police department to see if they have a drug collection program. Or, see a list of sites at: **medicationdisposal.utah.gov/permanentsites.htm**
- **Flush pain medication down the toilet.** Then remove or mark out personal information on the bottles before throwing them away. (Flushing is not recommended for other types of medications. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for details.)

Why lock up pain medication — and dispose of unused pills?

It can seem inconvenient to lock up medication. It can also be tempting to keep unused pain pills for future use. Yet there are important reasons to protect your medication and dispose of it when you're finished:

- **Opioid pain medication can be very dangerous if taken when it was not prescribed.** It should not be used for sleep, coughs, or anything that it wasn't prescribed to treat. (NEVER share pain medication with anyone, not even family.)
- **If you store unused pills, they can tempt others.** In fact, one in five teens reports misusing someone else's prescription drugs. Many get the pills from friends or relatives by raiding the medicine cabinet. Teen use of pain medication can lead to other drug abuse, including heroin addiction.
- **Unused medication can make you a target for robbery.** If thieves find out you have opioid pain medication, they can break into your home looking for pills.

Other ways to manage your pain

Taking your medication as directed is an important part of your pain management. Pain medication reduces your pain — it doesn't take pain away completely. The good news is that there are other things you can do, too. These don't replace your medication, but they can help manage the pain.

- **Help yourself relax.** Try to focus on breathing slowly and rhythmically.
- **Distract yourself.** Listen to music, watch television, or visit with a friend.
- **Ask your healthcare provider about applying cold or heat** to ease the pain, or about **physical therapy** or exercises that may be helpful in your situation.
- **Find spiritual or psychological support.** Talk with a friend or counselor or turn to your spiritual foundations.

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