

# **Prescription Pain Medication in Pregnancy**

This handout is for pregnant women who have been prescribed a type of pain medication called an opioid. The handout explains what opioids are, how they're used, and what you need to know and do to take them safely.

### What are opioids?

**Opioids** (sometimes called **narcotics**) are a type of pain medication available only by prescription. They're strong medications that affect how your brain handles pain signals.

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

# How are they used?

Opioids are usually prescribed for short-term pain (lasting a few days to a few weeks) from an illness, injury, or surgery. For long-term (chronic) pain, many doctors prefer other, non-opioid treatments, which studies show are more effective and safe for patients.

# Taking opioids: what do I need to KNOW?

When used as directed, opioids are safe and effective. However, their use also poses some risks. Here's what you need to know:

- Opioids can interact in a dangerous way with alcohol, recreational drugs, or certain medications.
- Opioids can cause various side effects.
  - The most common side effects are constipation and drowsiness.
  - The most serious side effect is decreased breathing (also called respiratory depression), which can be deadly. The risk of this is even greater for people who combine opioids with alcohol or with drugs for sleep or anxiety. Respiratory depression caused by accidental overdose is a leading cause of accidental death in women younger than 50.



- If you take opioid medication for long periods of time, you can develop a tolerance. Your usual dose of medication will be less effective. Also, opioids can sometimes trigger a response in which you actually feel more pain than before (hyperalgesia).
- If you stop the medication suddenly, you may have withdrawal symptoms. Common symptoms are sweating, chills, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.
- Opioids pose a much greater risk of abuse and addiction than was once thought.
  - Abuse is when you use the medication in ways that aren't prescribed, for example you share the medication with someone else, or you take it just to get high.
  - Addiction is when you keep using a medication, even though it's causing problems in your life.
     For example, taking the medication could be hurting your ability to work or study, have good relationships, stay out of trouble with the law, etc.

See the back of this handout, "What do I need to DO?" to learn how you can manage these risks.

# Are opioids safe for my baby?

Taken as prescribed, opioids don't appear to cause problems with a baby's development during pregnancy. However, they do get into the baby's bloodstream, so there's a significant risk that a baby exposed to opioids will go through withdrawal after birth.

Opioid withdrawal in a newborn is called **neonatal abstinence syndrome**, or **NAS**. It's seen in babies whose mothers took prescription pain medication during pregnancy — as well as in babies whose mothers took heroin, suboxone, or methadone.

NAS symptoms include fever, diarrhea, excessive crying, tremors, and poor feeding. After birth, babies with NAS may need to stay in the hospital for extra care and monitoring. The hospital stay can last several days or even weeks. Once home, a baby with NAS may continue to need sensitive care for several months, until symptoms subside.

NAS diagnoses have risen 300% in the past decade. Many experts think this rise reflects the increase in the use of prescription pain medication.

# Taking opioids: what do I need to DO?

Follow the directions below to manage the risks of taking opioid pain medication.

#### BEFORE YOU START the medication

- Tell your doctor about all your other medications.

  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.
  - Constipation is common. To prevent and treat it, drink extra water and take in plenty of fiber (fruits and vegetables are good sources).
  - Ask the people you live with to be alert to signs of respiratory depression. If they notice you're having trouble breathing or waking up, they should call 911 right away.
- 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.

# WHEN YOU FINISH taking the medication

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: useonlyasdirected.org/safe-disposaldrop-off-locator.
- 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.)