

Prescription Opioids: What you need to know

Prescription opioids are medicines used to help relieve severe pain. They are often prescribed after a surgery or injury, or for certain health problems. Some common opioid medicines are **codeine, hydrocodone, oxycodone, morphine, oxymorphone, and methadone.**

These medicines can be an important part of treatment. They also come with serious risks. It's important to work with your healthcare provider to make sure you are getting the safest, most effective care.

If you are prescribed opioids for pain:

- Be informed.** Keep your prescription in the bottle it came in. Make sure you know:
 - The name of your medicine
 - How much to take
 - How often to take it
 - Side effects to watch out for, and when to call your doctor
- Don't take more** pain medicine than your healthcare provider tells you to. **Don't take it more often** than they tell you to.
- Follow up with your primary healthcare provider.**
 - Work together to create a plan on how to manage your pain.
 - Talk about ways to help manage your pain that don't involve prescription opioids.
 - Talk about your concerns and side effects.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you should get a naloxone kit.** This can save your life if you have an accidental overdose.



Make sure you know the name of your medicine, how much you should take, how often to take it, and its potential risks and side effects.

- Help prevent misuse and abuse.**
 - Never sell or share prescriptions opioids.
 - Never use another person's prescriptions opioids.
- Lock up prescription opioids in a safe place and out of reach of others.** This may include visitors, children, friends, and family. Don't keep them in your medicine cabinet where anyone can find them.

Know your options

Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to manage your pain without opioids. Other methods **may actually work better** and have fewer risks and side effects. Options may include:

- Other pain relievers, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), or naproxen
- Physical therapy and exercise
- Working with a therapist to help learn ways to change the triggers of pain and stress
- Some medicines that are also used for depression or seizures

What are the risks and side effects?

The biggest risks of prescription opioids are **addiction and overdose**. Risks are higher when you use them for a long time. An opioid overdose can cause **slowed breathing and sudden death**.

Prescription opioids can have side effects, even when taken as directed. These include:

- Constipation — this is the most common side effect
- Tolerance — the need to take more medicine for the same pain relief
- Physical dependence — having symptoms of withdrawal when you stop taking them
- Greater sensitivity to pain
- Nausea, vomiting, and dry mouth
- Sleepiness and dizziness
- Confusion
- Depression
- Low levels of testosterone, which can lead to lower sex drive, energy, and strength
- Itching and sweating

Risks are greater if you:

- Have a history of drug misuse, substance abuse disorder, or overdose
- Are taking sedatives or you drink alcohol when taking prescription opioids
- Have a mental health condition, such as depression or anxiety
- Have sleep apnea
- Have a disability (increases your risk for falls)
- Are age 65 or older, are confused, have dementia or another mental disability
- Are pregnant

While you're taking prescription opioids:

- **Never use alcohol or street drugs.** Taking them together can kill you.
- Unless your doctor specifically says it's okay, **don't take any of these medicines:**
 - Benzodiazepines (such as Xanax or Valium)
 - Muscle relaxants (such as Soma or Flexeril)
 - Sleeping pills (such as Ambien or Lunesta)
 - Other prescription opioids
- Don't take any other pills or vitamins unless your doctor says it's okay.
- Don't drive or use machinery when impaired by opioid medication.

Safely dispose of unused prescription opioids

Dispose of leftover medicine at a drug collection site. Unused pills can be dangerous to leave around. You can find drop-off locations at the following websites:

- Use Only As Directed (useonlyasdirected.org)
- U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (<https://apps2.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/pubdispsearch/spring/main?execution=e1s1>).

It's best not to flush medications down the toilet as they can contaminate the water supply.

The information in this fact sheet is adapted from *Prescription Opioids: What You Need to Know* written by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and The American Hospital Association.

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