

# Buprenorphine for Opioid Use Disorder

## What is buprenorphine?

**Buprenorphine** [byoo-preh-NOR-fen] is an opioid medication used to help end an addiction to other opioids. Opioids are strong medications that relieve pain and may make you feel “high,” especially at higher doses. Some examples of commonly known opioids are **oxycodone** and **hydrocodone**. Buprenorphine should not make you feel high when you take it as prescribed.

Some medications that contain buprenorphine include **Suboxone**, **Subutex**, and **Sublocade**.

- **Suboxone** contains buprenorphine and a medication called naloxone. Naloxone helps to prevent buprenorphine abuse by causing withdrawal symptoms if a patient injects their buprenorphine.
- **Subutex** contains only buprenorphine. It’s prescribed for people who cannot take naloxone (for example, because of an allergy or pregnancy).
- **Sublocade** contains only buprenorphine. It’s injected and delivers the medication at a controlled rate over a 1-month period.

## How does buprenorphine work?

Buprenorphine medications reduce withdrawal symptoms and cravings by acting on the same areas of the brain as the opioids you were taking before.

## Is buprenorphine safe?

Buprenorphine is safer than other opioids, but it is still an opioid with the typical risks that are associated with other opioids. It can be dangerous if you don’t follow your doctor’s instructions. Your healthcare provider will monitor you closely while you are taking buprenorphine. You may need additional checkups and urine testing. You should not give your buprenorphine to anyone else. It is regulated as a controlled substance because it can be dangerous if not taken as prescribed. It’s against the law to share or sell controlled substances.



## What are the risks and side effects?

Buprenorphine, like other opioids, may cause serious health risks, especially if not taken as prescribed. It’s important to work closely with your healthcare team to lower these risks. Buprenorphine risks include:

- Decreased breathing, which can cause sudden death. (Risk is increased by obesity, sleep apnea, lung disease, and taking sedatives or other medicines that may decrease breathing).
- Addiction.
- Liver problems.
- Risks in pregnancy or breastfeeding.

Some people experience side effects from buprenorphine. Side effects may include:

- Nausea or vomiting.
- Headache.
- Sweating.
- Constipation.
- Numb mouth, painful tongue, or an increase in redness inside the mouth.
- Disturbance in attention.
- Lightheadedness or fainting.
- Irregular heartbeat (palpitations).
- Blurred vision.
- Back pain.
- Decrease in sleep (insomnia).
- Sleepiness, dizziness, and problems with coordination.
- Decrease in blood pressure. (You may feel dizzy when you stand up from sitting or lying down.)

**Be sure to tell your healthcare provider if you have any side effects.**

## How do I lower my health risks while taking buprenorphine?

- **Don't take more buprenorphine than your doctor prescribes.** Write down when you take each dose so you don't take too much. Keep track of how many doses are left so you don't run out.
- **Don't take buprenorphine with ANY other medications unless your doctor says it's OK.** This includes prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, herbs, and supplements. Sleep medications such as Ambien and anti-anxiety medications such as diazepam (Valium) and alprazolam (Xanax) can be especially dangerous. Make sure all doctors know you are taking buprenorphine before they give you other medicines to take.
- **Never drink alcohol or take illegal or recreational drugs while taking buprenorphine.** The combination can kill you.
- **Don't inject or "shoot-up" buprenorphine.** This can cause life-threatening withdrawal symptoms.
- **Ask the people you live with to watch you for slowed breathing or problems waking up.** If they see these problems, they should call 911 and tell the emergency providers that you are taking buprenorphine.

## Store buprenorphine safely

- **Lock up your medications away from children.** If a child accidentally takes some, get medical help fast. Buprenorphine could kill a child.
- **Keep the medication in its bottle.** The label provides you with important information. Also, medications must be in their original containers when taken aboard airplanes.

## Avoid withdrawal symptoms

Don't stop taking buprenorphine suddenly or you could get withdrawal symptoms. Work with your doctor to develop a plan for stopping. Then, follow it carefully.

## Keep yourself and others safe

- **You should not drive or operate machinery** until you are reasonably certain that buprenorphine does not hurt your ability to do these activities safely. Buprenorphine can slow your thinking ability and the physical actions needed to perform dangerous tasks such as driving or operating machinery (especially when first starting buprenorphine and when your dose is changed).
- **Don't share your medication with anyone.** It is illegal and dangerous to give your buprenorphine to others.
- **Dispose of unused medicine safely.** Check with your pharmacist or find drop-off sites at [useonlyasdirected.org/drop-off-locator](http://useonlyasdirected.org/drop-off-locator).

## What should I tell my provider?

- **Talk with your doctor about your treatment goals.** Your doctor will ask about your opioid use and your health, do a physical exam, and order tests to help determine the best treatment plan. Your treatment plan may also include counseling, other services, and rules you must follow.
- **Give your doctor a list of all the medications you take.** This includes prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal remedies. Some medications may cause life-threatening medical problems when you take them with buprenorphine.
- **Ask your doctor and pharmacist questions about your prescription.** Make sure you understand what you're taking, and why, and how to take it.
- **Ask your doctor to prescribe a rescue kit** with naloxone, which could save your life if you accidentally take too much buprenorphine.
- **Go to all your follow-up appointments.** Your doctor may need to adjust your medication or help you find other ways to reduce cravings. There are other treatments for opioid use disorder that might be just as effective as buprenorphine.

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