

Using Opioid Medicine During Pregnancy

What are opioid medications?

Opioids are strong medications available only by prescription. They are sometimes prescribed after surgery or childbirth and can also be used for treatment of opioid use disorder. Your prescription may have brand names such as Percocet, or Norco or a generic name such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, buprenorphine, or methadone.

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 recommend non-opioid treatments. Studies show these are more effective and safe for patients.

Do opioids put my baby at risk?

When taken as prescribed, opioids don't appear to affect a baby's development during pregnancy. However, they do get into the baby's bloodstream. If you take opioids close to delivery, there is a risk your baby will go through withdrawal after delivery. This is called **neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome**, or **NOWS**.

NOWS is seen in babies whose mothers took opioid pain medication during pregnancy — as well as in babies whose mothers took heroin, buprenorphine, or methadone.

- NOWS symptoms may not appear for up to 5 days after delivery. Symptoms can include fever, diarrhea, excessive crying, tremors, and poor feeding.
- Babies with NOWS may need to stay longer in the hospital after delivery for extra care and monitoring. The hospital stay can last several days or even weeks.
- Once home, a baby with NOWS may continue to need sensitive care for several months, until symptoms go away.



How do I keep myself and my baby safe?

BEFORE you start opioid medication:

- **Tell your doctor about everything else you're taking.** Bring a list of the prescriptions, over-the-counter medications, patches, injections, inhalers vitamins, and herbal pills you take.
- **Tell your doctor if you use street drugs or drink alcohol.** Mixed with opioids, these can cause serious reactions, and even death.
- **Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the prescription.** Be sure you understand what you're taking, why you're taking it, and how to take it. If the directions on the bottle don't make sense to you, ask them to explain.
- **Learn what side effects to watch out for.**
 - Constipation is the most common side effect. To prevent and treat it, drink extra water and take in plenty of fiber (fruits and vegetables are good sources). You can also ask your doctor if it's okay to take a mild laxative.
 - Slow breathing is the most serious side effect. This is also called respiratory [RES-pir-ah-tore-ee] depression, and it can be deadly.
- **Ask about naloxone** [nah-LOX-ohn]. Naloxone (Narcan) is a medicine given to reverse respiratory arrest (breathing has stopped) due to overdose. It can be given by anyone in case of an accidental overdose.

WHILE YOU'RE TAKING opioid medication

The best way to protect yourself and your baby is to follow your doctor's instructions.

- **Do NOT take more opioid medication than directed.** Do not take a higher dose than your doctor ordered even if you feel worse, 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 street drugs** while taking opioids.
- **Take the medication only as long as you need it.** For example, if your pain gets better, stop taking it. To avoid side effects that can happen when you stop suddenly, you may need to "taper off" the dosage for a few days.
- **Do NOT drive a car or use dangerous machinery** until you know how the medication affects you.
- **Tell the people you live with they should call 911 right away if they notice you're having trouble breathing or waking up.** Respiratory depression is often caused by an accidental overdose of opioid medication. **Respiratory depression caused by accidental overdose is a leading cause of death in women younger than 50.** Ask your doctor or pharmacist about getting naloxone, a medication that can reverse an overdose.

General risks of opioids

Opioids can be risky for anyone who uses them.

- **If you take opioid medication for long periods of time, you can develop a tolerance.** This means 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 (called **hyperalgesia** [hi-per-al-GEEZ-ya]).
- **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 misuse and addiction than was once thought.** The risk of this is even greater for people who combine opioids with alcohol or with drugs for sleep or anxiety.
 - **Misuse** 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 a disease that leads you to compulsively use the medication, even though it could be harming you. For example, taking the medication could be hurting your ability to work or study, have good relationships, or stay out of trouble with the law.

WHEN YOU FINISH taking opioid medications

Dispose of leftover medicine at a drug collection site. Unused pills can be dangerous to leave around. It's best not to flush medications down the toilet as they can contaminate the water supply. You can find drop-off locations at the website below:

U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency:

<https://apps2.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/pubdispsearch/spring/main?execution=e1s1>.

