

The hidden risks of pain relief

Important safety facts about
prescription pain relievers



It's a short step from feeling better...

Here's a word you may have seen before: opioids. They're prescription pain relievers that you might recognize by names such as morphine, methadone, oxycodone, fentanyl or hydrocodone, or by brand names such as Actiq[®], Percocet[®] or Vicodin[®].



... to becoming addicted or worse. Know your medicines.

Doctors prescribe opioids, also known as narcotics, to treat severe pain, either short term (such as what you might experience after an operation) or chronic (such as from osteoarthritis). However, opioids pose severe risks to your health if you don't use them properly.



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Addiction

Some people who take opioids become addicted. They develop a strong desire to continue taking the drug – a craving that goes beyond the need to relieve pain. They may look for other ways to get that drug, including going to different doctors or lying about their prescriptions. If left untreated, addiction can ruin lives.

Sometimes your body may become dependent, in which case your dose may need to be lowered gradually. You could also develop a tolerance of the drug, which means you may need higher doses to get the same effect. Please be assured that dependence and tolerance are NOT the same as addiction.

Even greater pain

Long-term use of opioids can actually increase your body's sensitivity to pain, a condition known as hyperalgesia. With hyperalgesia, the brain may interpret even normal sensations as painful, and higher doses of opioids can actually make the pain more intense.

Death

Improper use of prescription pain relievers can cause injury or death, whether through overdose, impaired judgment while driving a car (see below) or sleep apnea (a cessation of breathing during sleep). Overdoses of prescription painkillers killed nearly 46,802 people in 2018 – that's deadlier than heroin and cocaine combined.¹

Impaired performance and increased risk

Opioids can affect your judgment and balance. That's a bad combination if you're performing a potentially dangerous task, like driving a car or operating heavy machinery. Worse still, you may not even recognize that your judgment is off, so performing these tasks could pose a risk to others as well as yourself.

Common and less severe side effects include:

- Drowsiness
- Sexual dysfunction
- Constipation
- Euphoria
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Confusion

Still feeling pain? Talk to your doctor.

Chronic, persistent pain can have a debilitating effect on your life, changing what you do and even how you view yourself. If your medicine hasn't relieved your chronic pain, it could mean that opioids aren't the best option for you.

Or maybe your body is building up a tolerance to that drug. (That's not uncommon and, as mentioned earlier, is not a sign of addiction.) Be sure to let your doctor know, or perhaps seek a second opinion. There may be other ways to treat your pain, with fewer side effects.

Taking opioids: Important tips

- Take your medicine exactly as prescribed.
- Give your doctor a list of your current medicines and doses.
- Don't drink alcohol when taking opioids.
- Tell your doctor immediately if you feel any side effects.
- Think twice about driving a car or operating heavy machinery.
- Don't share your medicines or use other people's medicines.
- Keep them in a safe, secure location to minimize risk of theft or misuse by others.
- Talk to your doctor if your pain continues.



Please stay safe.

There's no doubt that pain relievers can be very useful, but – like most powerful drugs – they can cause a lot of harm if not taken properly.



Concerns or questions?

Talk to your doctor or call your adjuster.



1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Opioid Overdose Data Overview.
<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/index.html>. Updated March 19, 2020. Accessed May 19, 2020.

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