

# Pain Medication: Use It Safely

Opioids are a type of pain medication made from the poppy that is used to make opium and heroin. People have used opioids to treat pain for thousands of years. Opioids are effective for treating acute pain involving skin, muscle, or bone and joint pain in the first several weeks following injury or surgery. Opioids are less effective for treating chronic pain, headaches or nerve pain. They are sometimes used to treat cancer pain at the end of life. Some of the most common opioid pain relievers used today include hydrocodone, oxycodone, hydromorphone, tramadol and codeine.

## Opioid misuse: A large and growing problem

Over the last 15 years, the prescription of opioids has increased tenfold. Misuse now kills more than 100 people each day in the United States. Opioids are responsible for more deaths than both suicide and motor vehicle collisions combined. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), nearly 16,000 Americans died from overdoses involving opioid pain relievers in 2009. Most of these deaths were accidental.

## Talk with your provider

The progress of your treatment and your pain medication needs should be discussed with your providers, including your surgeon, physician assistant and nurse. While your providers want to limit pain following surgery or injury, they also understand the risks of abuse, addiction and possibly death associated with the use of these medicines. To reduce these risks, your provider may suggest switching to over the counter medicines such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen once the initial intense pain subsides.

## The pain dilemma

Pain is expected after injury or surgery, and mindset matters. Pain relievers cannot take pain away; they just make the pain less bothersome. Patients quickly develop tolerance to opioids, which means it requires more medicine to achieve the same amount of pain relief as time goes by. This is why opioid pain relievers work well in the short term, but do not work for long-term chronic pain.

## Side effects: Sometimes lethal

The most common side effects of opioids are nausea, constipation, itching and drowsiness. The most serious effect is a decrease in breathing, which can result in death. The chance of death can increase when pain relievers are used together with alcohol or other drugs that make you sleepy.

## Recreational use: A dangerous idea

Opioid pain relievers are sometimes used by patients or their friends to get high. Over half of the teens abusing these medicines get them from family or friends without their knowledge. In addition to potential poisoning, recreational opioid use creates addiction. One study of heroin users found that 39% of addicts reported being "hooked" on prescription pain relievers first.

## Drug disposal

Opioids should be disposed of when they are no longer needed to treat the injury or surgery for which they were originally prescribed. Studies report that between 10% and 30% of opioid pain relievers sold go unused. Leftover pain medicines kept in a patient's home increase the risk of accidental poisoning and drug abuse. These tragedies often affect family members or friends.

Many communities have organized ways to dispose of unused pain relievers. Some law enforcement agencies have drop boxes or hold designated dates to collect unused prescription medicines. *Do not* flush the pills down the toilet because it releases the drugs into the waterways. Water treatment facilities do not effectively remove these dissolved drugs, so contamination of drinking water is a growing concern.

Figure 1. Exercise extreme caution when using other medications with opioid pain relievers, particularly with other drugs that are associated with respiratory depression.



Figure 2. Opioid pain relievers rapidly increase the drug receptors in the brain, creating greater needs for the drug to achieve a similar level of pain relief. This can even give rise to severe pain that results from a non-painful stimulus.

