

Avoiding Problems from Opioid Pain Medicine

What are opioids?

Opioids (OH-pee-oyds) are medicines used to treat pain. They're also called narcotics. When you take them for more than a few days, they may cause serious problems.

What is tolerance?

If you take opioids every day for a long time they may stop working, and your pain may be as bad as it was before you started taking them. If this happens, you have built up a tolerance to the medicine.

What is withdrawal?

Your body may start to depend on opioids. That means that if you don't take them, or if you take less than your usual amount, you may have withdrawal. Withdrawal can feel like a bad case of the flu. You may sweat, have diarrhea, throw up, or have trouble sleeping. You may ache all over. You might even feel like you will die, but people rarely die from withdrawal.

What is addiction?

Some people become addicted to opioids. The more you take, the more likely this is to happen. Here are some signs of being addicted:

- Taking more of the medicine than your doctor prescribed
- Saving it up and taking a lot at once

- Taking it to feel good
- Spending a lot of time and effort to get more of the medicine
- Taking the medicine gets you in trouble at work or in your personal life

If you are addicted, it's nothing to be ashamed of. It can happen to anyone. But it's important to let your doctor know, because addiction can be treated.

Can opioids make my pain worse?

Yes. If you take opioids every day for a long time, your pain can get worse. It can even cause pain in parts of your body where you didn't have pain before.

Other problems you can get from taking opioids for a long time are:

- Constipation and stomachache
- Depression, sleepiness, and memory problems
- Low hormone levels, like testosterone
- Heart attack
- Trouble breathing
- Death from overdosing

What can I do to avoid problems?

- Take your medicine exactly as prescribed.
- Tell your doctor about other medicines you are taking. Some medicines don't mix well with opioids.



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- Don't use alcohol or street drugs when you are taking opioids.
- Tell your doctor right away if you have problems that might be related to opioids.
- Store your medicine where others can't get it.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Information Resource

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/opioid-addiction.html>

National Institute on Drug Abuse

<http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/prescription-drugs/opioids/what-are-opioids>

National Library of Medicine

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/007489.htm>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.hhs.gov/opioids>

Notes:

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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