Safe Opioid Use

What are opioids?

Opioids are prescription medicines that are used to help treat pain. There is a risk of abuse and/or addiction. That is why opioids are listed as controlled substances. There are strict rules for how opioids can be given to patients.



How do opioid medicines work?

Opioids act on nerve cells to help block feelings of pain.

Who decides which opioid medicines are safe to use?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is a federal agency of the Department of Health and Human Services. The FDA helps to decide the safety of food and drugs.

Some opioid medicines that the FDA says are safe to use are:

- Roxicodone, OxyContin (oxycodone).
- Percocet (oxycodone-acetaminophen).
- Norco (hydrocodone-acetaminophen).
- Dilaudid (hydromorphone).
- MS Contin (morphine).

Are there risks with using prescription opioid medicines?

Yes. There are risks with opioids. The risks can go up if opioids are taken for a long time. Some of the risks are:

- Tolerance — Over time, the body can get used to the medicine. This can cause people to start taking more medicine than they should to help their pain.
- Physical dependence — People can have feelings of withdrawal when they stop taking the medicine. These feelings can be:
  - Changes in mood
  - Chills or sweating
  - Vomiting
  - Overdose
  - Muscle or joint pain
  - Sleep problems
  - Addiction

There are non-opioid medicines to help treat pain that have fewer risks.*

Some non-opioid medicines that can help pain are:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen and naproxen
- Topical creams, gels, ointments, or patches, such as diclofenac gel (Voltaren) and lidocaine ointment

*Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking these medicines

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There are also things besides medicines to help pain.*

These are things like:

- Physical therapy and exercise
- Heat or ice
- Massage
- Relaxation techniques
- Acupuncture
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to help change the way you think about pain
- TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) unit that uses electrical impulses to help with pain
- Spinal cord stimulator (SCS) implanted device that uses electrical impulses to mask pain signals before they get to the brain

*Contact your health insurance plan to see if these things are covered benefits.

Which type of treatment will work best?

Not all pain treatments will work for everyone. It is important to talk to your doctor about the best way to treat your pain:

- Make sure you know about the benefits and risks before starting any type of pain treatment.
- Opioids are very strong medicines. If your doctor does use opioids to treat your pain, please make sure you know the right way to take the medicine.
- Always follow your doctor's orders for treating your pain. Never stop or change how you take medicine without first checking with your doctor.

For more information about opioid medicines, please contact us at **1-833-535-3767 (TTY 711)** October 1 – March 31: 8 a.m. - 8 p.m., seven days a week. April 1 – September 30: 8 a.m. - 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. You can also reach out to your doctor or local pharmacist.

Helpful resources:

"Helpful materials for patients," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/patients/materials.html.

"Prescription Opioids DrugFacts," National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute on Drug Abuse, https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/prescription-opioids.

Additional sources:

"Opioids," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), **https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/index.html**.

"Opioid Medications," U.S. Food and Drug Administration, **https://www.fda.gov/drugs/information-drug-class/opioid-medications**.

"What Are Opioids?" American Society of Anesthesiologists, **https://www.asahq.org/madeforthismoment/pain-management/opioid-treatment/what-are-opioids/**.

"Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS)" Cleveland Clinic, **https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/15840-transcutaneous-electrical-nerve-stimulation-tens**.

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