

If You Are Prescribed Opioids



Prescription opioids (like hydrocodone, oxycodone, and morphine) are one of the many options for reducing severe pain. While these medications can reduce pain during short-term use, they come with serious risks including addiction and death from overdose.

Ask your doctor these questions to fully understand both the benefits and risks of prescription opioids to make sure you're getting care that is safe, effective, and right for you.



1 What are the common side effects of opioids?

When opioids are taken exactly as directed, you may experience common side effects. Discuss these and other side effects with your doctor so you know what you may expect:

- Increased sensitivity to pain
- Constipation
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dry mouth
- Sleepiness
- Confusion
- Depression
- Itching
- Dizziness

2 What can I do to reduce the risks or intensity of side effects?

- Never take opioids in higher amounts or more often than prescribed.
- When you start taking opioids, they might affect your ability to safely operate a vehicle—proceed with caution until you know how they affect you.
- To prevent constipation with opioid use, drink more fluids and eat more fiber than usual, and maintain or increase physical activity. You might need stool softeners or laxatives.



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3 What increases my risk of overdose or death from this medication?

It is very dangerous to combine opioids with other drugs, especially those that cause drowsiness. Risks increase when your medication is combined with:

- Alcohol and/or other sedatives
- Benzodiazepines (also known as “benzos” and include diazepam and alprazolam)
- Other opioids (prescription or illicit, including heroin)

Talk to your doctor about any other medications you are using. Ask about the serious side effects (like excessive sleepiness, shallow breathing, or craving more of the medication). Call a doctor or go to the hospital if you experience these symptoms.

4 How long will I need to take prescription opioids?

Opioids should only be used when necessary and only for as long as necessary. Generally, for acute pain this means 3 to 7 days or less. Follow up with your doctor to reevaluate your pain and get guidance on how to cope with possible withdrawal symptoms when you stop.

Follow up with your doctor within the first few days of your prescription to ensure opioids are helping and to discuss what you can expect overall for pain relief and improvement.

5 How should I store my medication? What about unused medication?

Safe storage and disposal of unused medications can help prevent opioid misuse and overdose.

- Store prescription opioids in a secure place, out of reach of children, family, friends, and visitors.
- Never sell or share prescription opioids.
- Safely dispose of unused prescription opioids: Find your community drug take-back program or your pharmacy mail-back program, or flush them down the toilet, following guidance from the Food and Drug Administration (www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou)

6 What are the signs of opioid overdose?

- Small, constricted “pinpoint pupils”
- Falling asleep or loss of consciousness
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Limp body
- Pale, blue, or cold skin

Naloxone is a life-saving drug that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, if administered in time: <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/prevention/reverse-od.html>