

Opioids: How to use them safely

Have you been prescribed opioids?
Here's what you need to know.

What are opioids?

Opioid medications are a type of painkiller. Some are sold over the counter (such as Tylenol No. 1) and others are prescribed by a doctor or dentist. Examples of prescribed opioids include codeine (in Tylenol No. 2, No. 3 and No. 4), oxycodone (in Percocet and OxyNEO, which replaced OxyContin), morphine, hydromorphone (Dilaudid) and fentanyl.

Opioids are depressant drugs. This means they slow down the part of the brain that controls breathing. It's dangerous to take opioids while taking other depressants, such as alcohol, anxiety medication, sleeping pills or other medications that may make you drowsy, including over-the-counter medicine such as Gravol and Benadryl.

Why are opioids prescribed?

Opioid medications can be effective to manage pain when used as prescribed. Your doctor may prescribe them if you are in a lot of pain after surgery or an accident, or your dentist may prescribe them after dental surgery.

You may develop a tolerance to opioids

If you use opioids to manage pain, you may develop tolerance. This means you may need to use more to get the same effect. If you stop taking the drug for a few days, your tolerance will change. If you then start taking the same dose that you took before you stopped, your risk of overdose will go up.

Opioids can cause dependence

If you take opioids for more than a week, you may become dependent on them. This is not the same as being addicted. It means that if you stop using opioids suddenly, you may have very uncomfortable, though not life-threatening, withdrawal symptoms. These may include:

- sweating
- chills, shivering
- restlessness and/or extreme restless leg syndrome
- depression
- clammy or prickly skin (goosebumps)
- nausea, severe cramping and/or diarrhea
- yawning
- poor sleep
- uneasiness, agitation, severe anxiety.

How do I know if I have an opioid addiction?

When a person is addicted to opioid medication they have both physical and psychological dependence. Physical dependence means your body reacts to the absence of the drug. Psychological dependence means the drug is at the centre of your thoughts and feelings. You may crave the drug, and you may have to use more and more of it just to feel normal. You may want to stop, but can't.

Risk factors for opioid problems

Certain factors make people more likely to develop a problem with opioid use, such as:

- stress
- a history of trauma or abuse
- having other illnesses or chronic pain
- using other medications.

Those who are at greater risk include:

- teenagers
- older adults
- people with a personal or family history of mental health problems
- people with a personal or family history of addiction
- people who are homeless, have disabilities, or are living in poverty; First Nations people and others who experience social exclusion.

Getting help

Call ConnexOntario's Drug and Alcohol Helpline at 1 800 565-8603, or visit www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca.

How to reduce your risk of opioid problems

- Only take medications that are prescribed for you, with your doctor's or dentist's supervision.
- If you are prescribed opioids for pain, talk to your doctor, dentist or pharmacist about the benefits and risks.
- Don't take opioids with other depressant drugs, such as alcohol, anxiety or sleeping pills, Gravol or Benadryl. If you have to do so, consult your health care provider.
- Return any unused medication to your pharmacist.
- Do not use another person's medications.

Resources and links

Opioid Resource Hub: www.porticonetwork.ca/web/opioid-resource-hub/home

For links to many helpful resources about opioids, see the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's Ontario's Narcotic Strategy home page: www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/drugs/ons/resources.aspx.