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*Community, Family, Health*

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# Using Opioids for Pain: What You Should Know



## WHAT ARE OPIOIDS?

Opioids are a group of strong prescription pain medications, sometimes called narcotics.

They are usually prescribed to help ease moderate to severe pain because of an injury, illness or surgery.



## HOW DOES OPIOID PAIN MEDICATION AFFECT THE BRAIN AND BODY?

Opioid pain medication blocks pain messages sent from the body to the brain.

- Opioids may not ease all of your pain, but they can help you cope with your pain for a few days as your body heals and recovers.
- Opioids can cause unpleasant side effects. Dangerous reactions can occur if you take too much, take them too often, or mix them with alcohol, illegal drugs, and some medications. These reactions can be fatal.
- Tell your doctor about all the medicines and supplements you take before you agree to take any prescription medication for pain

Commonly Prescribed Opioid Pain Medications	
Generic Name	Examples of Brand Name
Codeine	Tylenol with Codeine®
Fentanyl	Duragesic®
Hydrocodone	Vicodin®
	Lortab®
	Lorcet®
Morphine	Kadian®
	MS Contin®
Oxycodone	OxyContin®
	Endocet®
	Percocet®
Tramadol	Ultracet®
	Ultram®



## RISKS AND COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

### RISKS

Difficulty with breathing • Worsening of pain • Impaired driving • Tolerance (needing a higher dose to get the same relief) • Dependency • Withdrawal • Addiction • May cause problems when taken with other drugs

### COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

Sleepiness • Confusion • Slow thinking • Constipation • Itching • Sweating • Nausea and Vomiting • Decreased sex drive

## UNDERSTANDING PAIN

**Pain is a normal part of the healing process.**

Pain is an unpleasant feeling and emotional experience due to illness, injury, disease or a medical condition.

How you feel and react to pain depends on what is causing the pain and several personal factors such as:

- **Your genetic makeup and how sensitive your body is to pain**
- **Gender (biological, psychological and social factors)**
- **Eating habits, activities, getting enough rest and sleep**
- **History of health problems**
- **Stress, anxiety, job status**
- **Past experiences with pain**
- **Coping strategies for recognizing and managing pain**

An injury or illness that may be very painful for one person may be only slightly painful for another.

People experience and react to pain differently.

## TALKING WITH YOUR DOCTOR

Be prepared to give information and ask questions about the cause of your pain. Make sure you discuss the type of pain you are feeling. This will help your doctor recommend the best treatment options available to you.

### FIND OUT YOUR OPTIONS

**Ask your doctor** about all of your treatment options so that together, you can decide the best possible plan for managing your pain.

#### Questions to ask:

- **What options are available for treating my pain?**
- **Could any of these treatment options cause a bad reaction with other medical conditions or medications?**

If you and your doctor decide that an opioid medication is the best treatment option, **ask the following questions:**

- **What are the risks and side effects of taking opioid medications?**
- **How many days should I take the opioid medication?**
- **If I feel better can I stop taking the medication?**

## OTHER TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR PAIN

Acute pain may be managed successfully with non-opioid medications and/or alternative treatments.

This list provides examples of some of the most commonly used and effective alternative treatments. Talk to your doctor about options that may help you.

**Please check with your health plan for benefit coverage.**

- Non-opioid pain relief medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®), aspirin, naproxen (Aleve®, Naprosyn®) and ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®)
- Self-Care (ice, heat, rest)
- Exercise (walking, swimming, stretching, yoga, Tai Chi)
- Physical Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Chiropractic or Osteopathic Care (spinal adjustment)
- Acupuncture
- TENS Unit (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation)
- Biofeedback
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

## SAFE STORAGE OF MEDICATIONS

- Opioid medications need to be stored in a secure and safe place.
- Choose a place in your house that is up and away and out of sight of children and visitors.
- Return medication to your secure location after every use.
- When traveling, keep medications in a locked carrying case.

## SAFE DISPOSAL OF MEDICATIONS

- Once you are finished taking the pain medication, promptly dispose of all remaining pills, tablets or patches.
- Minnesota has take-back programs for unused and outdated medication. Ask your doctor or contact your pharmacy, local police station or county law enforcement center to find the nearest location to you.
- Some pharmacies offer mail-back programs where you can pick up a drug disposal envelope.
- If a take-back or pharmacy mail-back program is not available where you live, you can go on the internet to learn how to safely dispose of unused medications at <https://www.pca.state.mn.us/living-green/managing-unwanted-medications>
- **Avoid throwing prescription medication in the garbage, flushing them down the toilet or pouring them down a sink.**