

How to Use Opioid Medicine for Short-term Pain Relief

Opioid Pain Medicine

If you have short-term or sudden pain from surgery, injury or illness, opioid pain medicine may help you to have less pain. Opioid pain medicine is one strategy out of many that you may use to have less pain and a speedier recovery.

The goal of opioid pain medicine is to reduce pain when it is most intense during your recovery. It is important to switch to non-opioid pain medicines as soon as you are able.

Important: The longer you take opioid pain medicines the more risk there is of becoming dependent (addicted). While opioid pain medicines can help manage your pain after surgery, injury or illness, you need to partner with your health care provider and transition to other ways to manage your pain.

When taking opioid pain medicine, find a balance between the amount of pills you take and the pain level with which you are able to cope. It is better for you to be active and put up with mild pain than it is to take so much pain medicine that you sleep too much or that you are stuck in bed or a chair.

How To Take Opioid Medicine

- Take the medicine as directed by your health care provider.
- Eat before you take the medicine.
- Drink plenty of water with the medicine.
- Write down when you take the medicine and how many pills you take.

- **Do not drive when you are taking the medicine.** The medicine will affect your ability to make decisions or react quickly.
- **Do not drink alcohol when you are taking the medicine.**
- Use it only for the first few days or weeks when the pain is most intense. Talk with your health care provider for a taper plan.
- Put your opioid medicine in a secure place to prevent others from using it.

Opioid Benefits and Risks

Potential benefits are:

- The medicine works quickly.
- You will feel less pain.
- You will be able to be active to speed your recovery. For every day you stay in bed, you need 3 days to regain your strength.
- You will be able to rest or sleep better.

Potential risks are:

- Taking an opioid can lead to addiction.
 - On average, more than 130 people die each day in the U.S. from an overdose of opioids, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- The longer you take opioids, the more your body gets used to it (known as tolerance), and two things happen:
 - They may not work as well.
 - You may have more side effects when you stop them.

These are not problems in the first 3 days of use.

(over)

- Taking too many opioids can cause side effects, such as:
 - feeling dizzy, itchy or both
 - making you feel groggy or sleepy
 - feeling sick to your stomach (nausea)
 - vomiting (throwing up)
 - being unable to have a regular bowel movement (constipation)
 - having breathing problems.
- Some opioids contain acetaminophen (Tylenol®), such as Norco® or Percocet®. Acetaminophen is an over-the-counter medicine. Do not take more than 3,000 mg of acetaminophen in 24 hours.
 - Allergic reactions to opioids or acetaminophen include:
 - hives, itching or a flushing feeling
 - swollen lips, tongue or both
 - nasal congestion, feeling like your throat is closing or choking
 - shortness of breath, wheeze or cough
 - feeling faint, lightheaded, dizzy or having a racing heart
 - nausea, vomiting, diarrhea (loose stools) and belly pain.
- You may be at a higher risk for side effects (including accidental death) if you have sleep apnea, drink alcohol, or if you take a benzodiazepine (sedative) medicine while taking an opioid.

How to Cut Back (Taper) an Opioid

Take your recommended doses when your pain is at its worst. Slowly cut back (taper) on the opioid pain medicine once you can cope with the pain by using other ways to manage your pain. Ask your health care provider for directions on how to taper. Be sure you know how long you should take the medicine.

How to Get Rid of Unused Opioids

Do not keep unused medicine “in case” you think you may need it. Having it in the house where other adults, children or pets could reach it is unsafe.

- To get rid of unused opioids, bring them to a drop-off location or to an Allina Health Pharmacy. To find a location near you:
 - **Minnesota:** Go to pca.state.mn.us and type “household hazardous waste” in the search box.
 - **Wisconsin:** Go to dnr.wi.gov and type “health care waste” in the search box.
- If you can’t get to a disposal site:
 - Scratch off your name, your provider’s name and the prescription number on the medicine label. Or, scribble the information out with a black marker.
 - Add a small amount of vinegar to dissolve most of the pills. (Do not flush the pills.)
 - Tape the cap of your medicine container shut with a strong tape.
 - Put the taped medicine container in a paper bag or other container that you cannot see through (such as an empty yogurt, sour cream or coffee container).
 - Throw the container in the garbage, not in the recycling bin.

When To Call Your Health Care Provider’s Office

Call your health care provider if you have:

- side effects or problems
- new pain
- questions or concerns.