

Taking Opioid Pain Medicine Safely

Information for patients taking opioid pain medicines

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

- How to control your pain
- Signs and symptoms of opioid overdose
- Why you need to wean off your pain medicine
- How to wean off slowly
- What happens if you stop suddenly



Why did I receive an opioid medicine prescription?

You may be prescribed opioid medicine to help you with pain. Opioid medicines are a stronger pain medicine that your doctor or nurse practitioner gives you a prescription for. Your pain should improve slowly over time.

As your pain gets better, you will need to wean off your opioid pain medicine. This means slowly reducing the amount you take until you are not taking it anymore. This is important because this kind of medicine can be addictive.

If you are not sure how to wean off your opioid medicine, talk to your family doctor or nurse practitioner. You can also talk to the doctor or nurse practitioner who prescribed the opioid medicine for you.



How can I control the pain?

Your doctor or nurse practitioner may prescribe opioid pain medicine for you. As you slowly reduce the opioids, you can use other medicines to help you control your pain. While you were in hospital, these medicines may have been ordered for you. Some examples are:

- drugs that prevent swelling like ibuprofen (Advil), celecoxib (Celebrex) or meloxicam (Mobicox). These drugs are called “non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs” or NSAIDs. NSAIDs also have daily limits on the amount you can safely take.
- acetaminophen (Tylenol)
Taking too much Tylenol may damage your liver. If you already have a problem with your liver, you will need to reduce the total daily amount of Tylenol you can safely take.

Once you are off the opioids, you can wean off the other pain medicine. You can wean off more quickly, until you are not taking any more pain medicine.

Side effects of opiate medicines:

- Drowsiness
- Nausea and vomiting
- Itching
- Constipation
- Dizziness

Signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose

- Weak or no breathing
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Pale or bluish colour under the lips, gums, around eyes, and nails
- Cold or clammy skin
- Extreme drowsiness — unable to wake up or move, even when shouted at or shaken
- Choking or coughing or gurgling or snoring sounds
- Pupils are very, very small

If you notice these signs, call 911 right away and give naloxone, if available.

- Naloxone is a medicine that can help to reverse the effects of the overdose. More than one dose may be needed. The effects of naloxone are temporary.
- Naloxone is available from your pharmacy without a prescription.

How do I wean off?

Do not stop taking the opioid pain medicine right away. You should slowly reduce the amount you are taking until you are off the pain medicine.

You may be taking 2 kinds of medicine:

- a long acting (sustained release) pain medicine such as Hydromorph Contin, OxyNEO, MS Contin, or fentanyl patch
- a short acting (immediate release) pain medicine such as oxycodone, hydromorphone, morphine, or codeine

- ✓ **Wean off the long acting medicine first.**
- ✓ **Then wean off the short acting medicine.**

If you are taking Percocet (which contains 5 mg of oxycodone and 325 mg of Tylenol in each tablet), limit the total amount of Tylenol you take. Ask your family doctor, nurse practitioner or pharmacist to help you with this.

How slowly should I wean off?

There is a Canadian guideline for using opioids safely.

If you have been taking this medicine for less than 1 month after surgery:

- Slowly wean off the pain medicine.
- See the examples below.

If you have been taking pain medicine for more than 1 month:

- Wean off the medicine more slowly.
- Speak with the doctor or nurse practitioner who orders your pain medicine. They can help you with this weaning process.

See these examples.

Do this to wean off long acting pain medicine:

Slowly reduce the dose you are taking. For example, you may take 1 less dose of the medicine every day. Do this over several days unless your health care provider has given you different instructions following your recovery.

Your family doctor or nurse practitioner can help you cut down on the medicine. For example, if you are taking this medicine:

- 3 times per day, reduce to 2 times per day for 2 to 3 days
- 2 times per day, reduce to 1 time per day for 2 to 3 days
- 1 time per day, try stopping

Important: If you are using fentanyl patch, please talk with the doctor who prescribed it for help with weaning off this medicine.

Do this to wean off short acting pain medicine:

1. When you start weaning off the medicine, increase the amount of time between doses. For example, if you are taking a dose every 4 hours, extend that time:

- Take a dose every 5 to 6 hours for 1 or 2 days.
- Then, take a dose every 7 to 8 hours for 1 or 2 days.

2. After step 1, start to reduce the dose. For example:

- If you are taking 2 pills each time, start taking 1 pill each time.
- Do this for 1 to 2 days.
- If you are taking 1 pill each time, cut the pill in half and take only half a pill each time. Do this for 1 to 2 days.



You may need to wean off opioid pain medicine faster than the above examples if:

- the medicine is too strong for you (you feel sleepy)
- you have sleep apnea (you have short but repeated stops in your breathing during sleep)

Safely store and dispose of your pain medicine

Pain medicine that is not stored or disposed of safely could be stolen or taken by mistake.

Safe storage

- Store pain medicine in a locked drawer or cabinet.
- Do not share your pain medicine. Pain medicine prescribed to you can be dangerous to others.

Safe disposal

- It is dangerous to keep unused or expired pain medicine that you no longer need.
- Take unused or expired pain medicine to a pharmacy for safe disposal.
- Do not flush medicine down the toilet.
- Do not throw medicine in the garbage.

What happens if I stop suddenly?

If you stop your opioid medicine suddenly, you may have symptoms of withdrawal. These can include:

Physical (body) symptoms like:

- sweating
- fever
- shaking
- nausea (wanting to throw up)
- vomiting (throwing up)
- diarrhea
- more pain

Other symptoms like:

- cravings
- feeling tired and having trouble sleeping
- anxiety (worried all the time)
- feeling agitated or irritable
- aggression (feeling angry towards people)

These symptoms may start from 6 to 24 hours after taking your last dose of opioid pain medicine.

You can wait for the symptoms to pass over the next day or two. Or you can speak with your family doctor, nurse practitioner or pharmacist. They can give you medicine to help control your symptoms of withdrawal.

Withdrawal symptoms are not a sign that you are addicted. They are a sign that your body is used to taking the opioid regularly and needs to wean off it slowly.

Opioid medicines are not usually addictive if you take them for pain. But they can lead to addiction if you do not manage them carefully. So it is important to wean yourself off these medicines as soon as possible.

To prevent addiction, you may need to stop taking the opioid medicine and accept a moderate amount of pain.

If you have trouble reducing your pain medicines, please contact your family doctor, surgeon, prescribing doctor or nurse practitioner for help.



Remember:

- **Do not drink alcohol while using opioid pain medicines**
- **Do not use sleeping pills or sedatives without talking to your doctor or nurse practitioner first.**

Reviewed by: Dr. A. Bhatia and Dr. P. Tumber

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Acute Pain Service, Department of Anesthesia, Toronto Western Hospital

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