

Opioids: What Are They and How to Use Them Safely



What are opioids?

Opioids are strong pain medicines that may also be called narcotics. They are often used for short-term treatment of moderate to severe pain.

Opioids are not guaranteed to reduce your pain to zero. They can be helpful, but they can also be harmful.

Opioids may be used with other medicines, such as Tylenol (acetaminophen), Motrin (ibuprofen) or Aleve (naproxen).

You may also use other pain control approaches such as hot and/or cold packs, relaxation and gentle physical activity. Other treatments such as acupuncture, chiropractic treatment and/or massage may also help.

It is important to understand that the goal of opioid use is to reduce pain to a point where you can complete your daily tasks, although you may not become pain-free.

Generic	Trade Names
hydrocodone/ acetaminophen	Lorcet [®] , Lortab [®] , Norco [®] , Vicodin [®]
hydromorphone	Dilaudid [®] , Exalgo [®]
morphine	Kadian [®] , MS Contin [®] , MorphoBond [™]
oxycodone	OxyContin [®] , Oxaydo [®]
oxycodone and acetaminophen	Percocet [®] , Roxicet [™]

How do you use opioids safely?

1. Tell your provider if you do not want opioid pain medications.
2. Do not take opioids you may have been prescribed in the past without first discussing with your health care provider.
3. Never take opioids in a larger amount or more often than recommended by your health care provider. Call your health care provider if your pain is not helped after taking the prescribed amount, or if your pain is getting worse.
4. Never sell or share prescription medicines and never use another person's prescription medicines.
5. Store all prescriptions in a secure, locked place so kids, other people or pets cannot get to them.
6. Know where your opioids are and count the pills weekly to make sure none are missing.
7. Follow your provider's recommendations to help reduce the amount of opioids you take over time.
8. Get a Narcan (naloxone) kit and learn how to use it in case of emergency. You can get the kit at most pharmacies, often without a prescription. Narcan is safe to use.

What are opioid risks?

- **Tolerance** – over time, you may need more opioids to get the same effect.
- **Physical Dependence** – if you suddenly stop taking opioids you may have withdrawal symptoms such as feeling sick to your stomach, throwing up, aches, loose bowel movements, seizures or shakes, sweats and/or chills.
- **Addiction (also called Opioid Use Disorder)** – uncontrollable craving to use opioids.
- **Accidental overdose and/or death** – misuse of opioids – such as taking more than you should or mixing them with illegal drugs, alcohol or other medicines – may hurt or kill you.

What is an opioid emergency?

Taking opioids with alcohol, illegal drugs or other prescription medicines including sleep aids may cause accidental overdose.

Signs of overdose include:

- Small ("pinpoint") pupils
- Falling asleep or loss of consciousness ("passing out")
- Slow or shallow breathing
- Limp body
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Pale, blue or cold skin

What to do if someone is overdosing

1. Call 9-1-1 right away.
2. Give Narcan (naloxone) if you have it.
3. Try to keep the person awake and breathing.
4. Lay the person on their side to prevent choking. If they are having a seizure, do not put anything in their mouth.
5. Stay with them until emergency personnel arrive.

How do you dispose of opioids safely?

Do not save unused opioids for later use.

Dispose of unused opioids by taking them to an official disposal location, which can be found by going to the Rx Drug Drop Box website (RXDrugDropBox.org), or you can use a drug disposal bag provided by a health care provider or pharmacist or provided at a community outreach event.

Do not throw opioids in the trash or flush down the drain or toilet.



For a list of permanent University Hospitals drop off locations, scan the QR code.

