

Understanding Opioids & How They Work

You may be prescribed an opioid painkiller for surgery, an injury or ongoing pain. It's important to understand how this type of medication works and how it might impact your safety at work and at home.

Opioid Overdose Is an Epidemic in the U.S.

Taking opioids can lead to development of an opioid use disorder, the medical name for opioid addiction. Drug overdoses are now the No. 1 cause of preventable death in the U.S., with over 47,000 opioid overdose deaths in 2017 alone.

What Are Opioids?

Opioids are prescription medications that relieve pain. Common brand names include Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet and Dilaudid. You might have also heard of the generic opioids oxycodone and hydrocodone. A doctor or dentist may prescribe this type of drug to help you manage pain.

What Happens When You Take Opioids?

Opioids decrease a person's sensations of pain by blocking pain messages sent through the spinal cord to the brain. However, opioids also cause the brain to produce dopamine. Dopamine is the same chemical that gives you a feeling of enjoyment after eating a good meal, listening to your favorite music or playing a sport. Taking opioids can sometimes make people feel euphoric, energetic, smarter, more confident, or less depressed.

Opioids can also have side effects that impair your physical and mental functioning. Common physical side effects are dizziness, sleepiness, upset stomach or constipation, blurred vision and dry mouth. In addition, opioid use can cause confusion, unusual thoughts, impulsive behavior, delayed reaction time or difficulty in following directions.

Dizziness or severe sleepiness can cause falls, vehicle crashes or contribute to other safety incidents. One study determined that opioid use increased the risk of committing an unsafe driving act¹. Opioid use can lead to serious errors when performing job tasks that require focus, attention to detail or the need to react quickly.

Over time you may feel less of the opioid's effect and need more of the medication to achieve the same effect, which is called developing a tolerance. Developing a tolerance is a natural process that does not indicate an opioid use disorder or addiction. If you are taking an opioid and feel it is not working as well as it used to, do not increase the dose on your own. Talk to your doctor about what you should do next.

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¹ Dubois, S., Bédard, M., Weaver, B. The association between opioid analgesics and unsafe driving actions preceding fatal crashes. *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, Volume 42, Issue 1, January 2010, pp. 30-37.

Impairment from Opioid Use

There is a greater risk of impairment when you first start to take opioids, when your dose increases, or if you also use other drugs or substances such as anti-anxiety medicines or alcohol. If doctors prescribe an opioid for you, be sure they are aware of all the other drugs you are using, and talk about your alcohol consumption. Let your doctor know if you perform safety-sensitive tasks at work or must drive a vehicle.

What Happens When You Stop Taking Opioids

Not everyone reacts to opioids the same way. Some people can take opioids and stop when they want to. Others find it harder to stop. This is because the interaction of the brain with the drug differs from person to person, and not due to having the willpower to stop or a desire to continue.

Stopping opioid use suddenly or with rapid dosage decreases causes withdrawal. Opioid withdrawal symptoms include extreme anxiety, restlessness, insomnia, diarrhea, vomiting, and bone and muscle pain. Though the most intense of these symptoms abate after 24–72 hours, some symptoms, such as anxiety and insomnia, can linger for months.

What Are the Alternatives?

The best way to avoid problems from opioid use is to take them only if you need them, and take them for the shortest possible length of time. Ask your doctor about trying non-opioid alternatives such as over-the-counter medications or physical therapy before taking opioids. One study found that taking 200 milligrams of ibuprofen plus 500 milligrams of acetaminophen at the same time has more pain relieving power than most opioids.² That's the equivalent of one regular Advil and one Extra-Strength Tylenol.

We have “Opioids: Warn Me” labels that you and everyone in your family can put on your insurance card and pharmacy loyalty card. The label reminds you to talk to your doctor and pharmacist any time they may be prescribing or filling a prescription for opioids. After you apply the labels, keep the card, which has questions to ask your doctor about the prescription.

Opioids are powerful medications and should only be taken if really needed, and for the shortest possible amount of time. To keep yourself safe and healthy, keep these facts in mind when your doctor or dentist prescribes an opioid.

Medical advice and information in this document were approved by NSC physicians who advise the Council on our substance use harm initiatives. These doctors also are members of the [NSC Physician Speakers Bureau](#).

² Teater, D. *Evidence for the Efficacy of Pain Medications*. National Safety Council, 2014.