

Prescription Opioid Safety



What are prescription opioids?

Opioids, also known as narcotics, are medications used to treat moderate to severe pain and require a prescription written by your doctor.

There are many different opioid pain medications available and some are stronger than others. Common opioid prescriptions are listed below. These types of medications also have risks and side effects that you need to be aware of.

Generic	Example Brand Names
Acetaminophen-Codeine	Tylenol with Codeine No. 3
Fentanyl	Duragesic
Hydrocodone-acetaminophen	Lortab, Norco, Vicodin
Hydromorphone	Dilaudid
Methadone	Methadose
Morphine	MS Contin
Oxycodone	Oxycontin
Oxycodone-acetaminophen	Endocet, Percocet

What are the risks and side effects of prescription opioids?

Prescription opioids have serious risks for misuse and overdose. They also have side effects, which include:

- Constipation
- Nausea, vomiting and dry mouth
- Dizziness
- Sleepiness
- Confusion
- Low levels of testosterone

- Increased pain sensitivity
- Itching and sweating
- Tolerance: this means that over time, you may need more medication to treat your pain
- Physical dependence: this means that if the medication is stopped suddenly, you could have withdrawal symptoms. This may develop even after taking prescription opioids for a short amount of time. If you want to stop taking your opioid, work with your doctor to taper off the medication.

It is very important that you:

- Take your prescription opioid as prescribed by your doctor; **never take opioids in greater amounts or more often than prescribed**
- Take opioids for the shortest amount of time possible
- Do not share your medication with other people
- Avoid driving or activities that require mental alertness until you know how the drug affects you
- Opioids should not be taken with medications such as benzodiazepines or muscle relaxants; this will increase the risk for overdose

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/aha-patient-opioid-factsheet-a.pdf.

What is the difference between dependence and addiction?

Physical dependence is not uncommon and can occur with many types of medication, including opioids. It can occur quickly (after about three weeks) and can cause withdrawal symptoms if the opioid is stopped suddenly. Withdrawal symptoms may include:

- Cramping, diarrhea, upset stomach, vomiting
- Sweating
- Shivering
- Anxiety, irritability, agitation
- Shakiness (tremor)
- High blood pressure, fast heartbeat
- Trouble sleeping

Physical dependence is not the same as addiction.

Addiction is a complex disorder that causes an intense desire to consume more drug even though the person knows there are harmful consequences. Symptoms of addiction include:

- Strong craving or urge to use the drug
- Negative effects on work, school and personal relationships
- Risky use
- Seeking more drug to feel the desired effects

What drug and alcohol interactions should I watch out for?

Some medications and foods may interact with prescription opioids and increase your risk of a drug overdose. Prescription opioids should never be taken with alcohol. Taking prescription opioids with illegal or recreational drugs can increase your risk of having a drug overdose. Medications used to treat anxiety or muscle spasms may interact with prescription opioids and increase the risk of overdose.

Some opioids are combination products that contain acetaminophen (also known as Tylenol or APAP). Avoid taking products with acetaminophen while taking a prescription opioid containing acetaminophen unless directed by your doctor. Too much acetaminophen can damage the liver. The makers of Tylenol agree that adults should limit their intake to 3,000 milligrams (mg)

of acetaminophen per day. If pain persists, your doctor may recommend up to 4,000 mg per day. Make sure to tell your doctor or pharmacist which medications you are taking so they can check for interactions. If you see multiple doctors (including dentists), it is important to give them a current list of your medications.

What happens during an opioid overdose?

Drug overdoses can occur when taking more opioid than prescribed and/or taking your opioid with alcohol and/or medications that interact with opioids. During an opioid overdose you can experience the following:

- Loss of consciousness (person cannot be awakened or cannot speak)
- Breathing slows or stops (fingernails or lips will turn blue)
- Low blood pressure
- Slow or stopped heartbeat
- Vomiting or gurgling
- Coma
- Seizures
- Death

What is naloxone?

Naloxone can potentially reverse an opioid overdose and restore breathing. Naloxone is available as an injection or a nasal spray. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for more details about these medications.

Naloxone laws vary by state. All states have options that allow you to purchase a naloxone product from pharmacies without a prescription. The FDA has also approved for naloxone to be made available over-the-counter.



Naloxone is a safety tool for anyone taking opioids, not just people who may be at risk of abusing the medication. Naloxone can be used if you experience an opioid overdose emergency from accidentally taking more of your opioid than the prescribed dose, or mistakenly taking an interacting medication in combination with your opioid. It may also be helpful for a caregiver, family member or friend to carry naloxone in case you need an emergency administration. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about whether naloxone is right for you.

What should I do if my loved one has an opioid overdose emergency?

During an opioid overdose, the brain is not getting enough oxygen. This is a medical emergency and you need to act as fast as possible.

1. If your loved one is unconscious, try waking them by yelling their name or rubbing their chest with your knuckle.
2. Call 911 immediately. (**Note:** It is important to call 911 even if they respond to naloxone. This person needs to be evaluated by a doctor. If the opioid prescription is extended-release or long-acting, the overdose may continue once the naloxone wears off.)

3. Perform rescue breaths to supply oxygen to the brain and administer naloxone, if available. Continue rescue breaths until your loved one is awake. If they do not respond within a few minutes, give another dose of naloxone.
4. Once you are sure your loved one is breathing, roll them onto their left side to prevent choking.
5. Watch your loved one to make sure they keep breathing until help arrives.

What are the treatment options for an opioid use disorder?

There are resources available to those seeking help for opioid dependence, misuse or addiction. These programs include medication-assisted treatments (MATs) that combine the use of medications along with counseling and behavioral therapy. The goals of MATs are recovery and living a self-directed life. There are opioid treatment programs (OTPs) that provide MAT to people that have an opioid use disorder. Medications used in OTPs include buprenorphine, methadone and naltrexone.

Talk to your doctor if you need help with an opioid use disorder, alcohol abuse, prescription drug abuse or illegal drug abuse. Resources include:

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline, also known as the Treatment Referral Routing Service, at 1-800-662-4357 or TTY: 1-800-487-4889.
- Find an OTP at www.samhsa.gov.

- Check the FEP provider directory to find a health care provider covered on your Plan at www.fepblue.org/provider.
- Visit www.fepblue.org/telehealth or call 1-855-636-1579 (TTY: 1-855-636-1578) toll free to access affordable, high-quality care for non-emergency medical issues, including counseling for behavioral health and substance use disorder.

What else can I do to treat pain?

There are many options available to treat pain which include non-opioid medications (over the counter or prescription), exercise, rehabilitation or behavioral therapy. Non-opioid prescriptions may be helpful if you have nerve pain, migraines or fibromyalgia.

Some medications may work better with fewer side effects than opioids, especially for temporary pain or low back pain. Talk to your doctor for the best non-opioid medication options to treat your pain.

Non-opioid options can include:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), naproxen (Aleve) or aspirin
- Medications for depression or seizures
- Exercise
- Physical therapy
- Behavioral therapy

If your pain is not controlled, your doctor may refer you to see a pain specialist to find the best treatment options available for you.

How should I store prescription opioids?

It is important to store your prescription opioids securely to keep others safe. These medications can be deadly if swallowed accidentally by children or pets. It may be helpful to store your opioid prescriptions in a medication lock box to keep them secure from children and visitors.

What should I do if I have expired or unwanted pain medications?

The best way to dispose of expired or unwanted pain medications is to take your medications to a location that is an authorized collector by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). To find a DEA-approved location, call 1-800-882-9539 or visit the DEA website at www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov. You may also contact your city or county government household trash and recycling service to learn about medication disposal in your area.

If you are unable to find a location to drop off your expired or unwanted pain medications, and there are no specific disposal instructions available, you may dispose of most medications in the regular trash. Remove the medication from the original container, mix it in an unmarked, sealable bag with kitty litter or coffee grounds, then dispose of the bag in the trash.



Rarely, certain medications may need to be flushed down the toilet for safety reasons. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) provides a list of medications called the FDA Flush List that should be flushed down the toilet if there are no other disposal options. Please visit the FDA website for this list at www.fda.gov. Do not flush your medication unless it is on the FDA flush list.



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