

Should You Treat Pain with Opioids?

Why painkillers such as Oxycontin, Percocet, and Vicodin usually aren't worth the risk

What Are Opioids?

Opioids are very strong prescription pain medicines. They are stronger than aspirin, Tylenol, Advil, and other pain medicines. Opioids are used to treat pain after surgery, or pain caused by a wound, burn, or injury. They are also used to treat pain such as arthritis, lower-back pain, and nerve pain.

Changes to How Doctors Prescribe Opioids

Many doctors are moving away from using these drugs to treat pain. That's because new research shows they do not work well to treat many kinds of pain. They also come with a risk of serious side effects, including addiction.

What Should I Try Before Opioids?

If you have ongoing pain we recommend you start with nondrug treatments, such as exercise, cognitive behavioral therapy, biofeedback, or physical therapy.

If you need pain medicine, you may need to try a combination of treatments. First try an over-the-counter pain medicine like acetaminophen (Tylenol or generic), ibuprofen (Advil or generic), or naproxen (Aleve or generic.)

Do Opioids Work to Treat Pain?

Opioids are generally better for treating short-term pain than long-term pain. They may reduce long-term pain but not make it go away entirely.

If you take opioids for a long time, you may need to take higher doses to get the same pain relief. This is called "building up a tolerance." If you take a higher dose, you are more likely to experience side effects.

What Are the Side Effects of Opioids?

Most people who take an opioid have at least one side effect. You and your doctor will have to look at the possible benefits and side effects, and decide if opioids are worth the risks. Many people find that the side effects, including nausea, constipation, and drowsiness, lower their quality of life.

Common Side Effects of Opioids

- Anxiety and nervousness
- Breathing problems
- Constipation
- Depression
- Difficulty having an orgasm
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Increased pain sensitivity
- Itching
- Less desire for sex
- Memory problems
- Nausea and vomiting
- Weakening of the immune system

Can I Become Addicted to Opioids?

One of the most serious concerns about taking opioids is the risk of addiction.

Addiction may be less likely if you take opioids for short periods, which is about three days or so. If you find that you crave the drug between doses, or if you take more than prescribed, talk to your healthcare provider immediately. That's because you may have become dependent or even addicted to the pain drug and you'll need help to stop taking it.

Opioid Safety Warnings

Opioids can cause breathing to stop completely, leading to death. That risk is greatest when the drugs are taken at high doses or combined with alcohol or medicines that make you feel sleepy, like sleeping pills.



Our Advice

We usually compare the effectiveness, safety, and cost of drugs, and then choose “Best Buys.” We have not chosen any Best Buy opioids for the treatment of pain. We did not find evidence that opioids work to treat ongoing pain. And the risk of addiction and overdose is too high.

However, you and your doctor may decide that you need to try an opioid to relieve pain. For these situations we recommend generic versions of hydrocodone/acetaminophen, oxycodone, or tramadol. These opioids are not better than others, but the generic versions are less expensive. They usually cost less than \$100 a month.

Safe Opioid Use Checklist

- Read the label and take the drug exactly as directed.** Never take more than directed. Don't take it with alcohol. And don't combine it with any other drug unless your doctor says it's okay. Most opioid deaths happen because the person also takes alcohol or sleeping pills.
- Get tested for sleep apnea.** If you snore loudly, get checked for the condition, because opioids can make it worse or even fatal.
- Watch out for respiratory problems.** Opioids can interfere with breathing if you have a cold, an asthma flare-up, or bronchitis. If you get a respiratory illness while taking opioids, let your doctor know right away. Find out if you need a lower dose until you recover.
- Avoid opioids if you are pregnant or could become pregnant.** The drugs slightly increase the risk of birth defects. They also increase the risk that a baby will be born early or underweight. If a woman takes opioids late in pregnancy, her baby could be born addicted to the drugs and suffer withdrawal symptoms.
- Don't drive.** Avoid doing anything that requires you to be fully alert. This is especially important when you first start taking an opioid, or whenever the type or dose changes.
- Put opioids in a locked drawer or cabinet.** This will help prevent children or others from using them.
- Expect your doctor to check you often.** If you are taking opioids, your doctor should check you at regular visits. Your pain and ability to do things should improve by at least one-third after you start an opioid. If you do not improve this much, the opioid probably is not working well enough to justify the risks.
- Discard unused pills.** Take them to your pharmacy or a community drug takeback program. If you can't do that, flush them down the toilet.