

Opioids for Acute Pain

What You Need to Know



Types of Pain

Acute pain usually occurs suddenly and has a known cause, like an injury, surgery, or infection. You may have experienced acute pain, for example, from a wisdom tooth extraction, an outpatient medical procedure, or a broken arm after a car crash. Acute pain normally resolves as your body heals. Chronic pain, on the other hand, can last weeks or months—past the normal time of healing.

Prescription Opioids

Prescription opioids (like hydrocodone, oxycodone, and morphine) are one of the many options for treating severe acute pain. While these medications can reduce pain during short-term use, they come with serious risks including addiction and death from overdose when taken for longer periods of time or at high doses.

Acute pain can be managed without opioids

Ask your doctor about ways to relieve your pain that do not involve prescription opioids. These treatments may actually work better and have fewer risks and side effects.

Ask your doctor about your options and what level of pain relief and improvement you can expect for your acute pain.

Nonopioid options include:



Pain relievers like ibuprofen, naproxen, and acetaminophen



Acupuncture or massage



Application of heat or ice



U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention

Learn More: www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose

If You Are Prescribed Opioids

Know your risks

It is critical to understand the potential side effects and risks of opioid pain medications. Even when taken as directed, opioids can have several side effects including:

- Tolerance, meaning you might need to take more of a medication for the same pain relief
- Constipation
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dry mouth
- Sleepiness and dizziness
- Physical dependence, meaning you have withdrawal symptoms when a medication is stopped—this can develop within a few days
- Confusion
- Depression
- Itching

Know what to expect from your doctor

If your doctor is prescribing opioids for acute pain, you can expect him or her to protect your safety in some of the following ways. Your provider may:

- Prescribe the lowest effective dose of immediate-release opioids
- Prescribe treatment for 3 days or less, which is usually enough for most acute conditions
- Ask you to follow up if your pain is not resolving as quickly as expected
- Check your state's prescription drug monitoring program
- Conduct urine drug testing during the course of your therapy
- Provide instructions on how to taper opioids to minimize withdrawal symptoms

Know your responsibilities

It is critical to know exactly how much and how often to take the opioid pain medications you are prescribed, as well as how to safely store and dispose of them.

- Never take opioids in higher amounts or more often than prescribed
- Do not combine opioids with alcohol or other drugs that cause drowsiness, such as:
 - Benzodiazepines, also known as “benzos” including diazepam and alprazolam
 - Muscle relaxants
 - Sleep aids
- Never sell or share prescription opioids
- Store opioids in a secure place and out of reach of others (including children, family, friends, and visitors)
- If you have unused opioids at the end of your treatment:
 - Find your community drug take-back program,
 - Find your pharmacy mail-back program, or
 - Flush them down the toilet following guidance from the Food and Drug Administration: <https://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm101653.htm>

