

Opioid safety

...for patients with chronic pain

What are opioids?

Opioids are strong medicines used to treat moderate to severe pain. They include oxycodone, morphine, hydromorphone, fentanyl, codeine, methadone and tramadol. Often prescribed for short-term pain (for example, from broken bones or surgery) and pain from cancer and other illnesses, opioids can sometimes be useful in treating chronic pain.

Because opioids don't cure the underlying medical problem causing the pain and often become less effective over time, treatment for chronic pain should also include other ways of managing pain.

Side-effects and risks

Common side-effects of opioids are:

- sleepiness
- nausea
- constipation
- itching
- sweating
- increased pain
- disrupted sleep or sleep apnea (pauses in breathing while asleep)
- changes in hormones, such as testosterone
- withdrawal symptoms after stopping, (tiredness, anxiety, runny nose, watery eyes, sweating, yawning and/or feeling sick)

Serious risks include opioid use disorder with longer term use (see sidebar), and overdose or death from high doses or interaction with alcohol or other drugs.

Naloxone saves lives!

Patients taking opioids should talk to their healthcare provider about naloxone, a fast-acting drug that can temporarily reverse opioid overdose in an emergency.

Naloxone kits are available without a prescription from many Alberta pharmacies and community health centres (map at <http://bit.ly/naloxone-AB>).

Treating chronic pain

Chronic pain affects every part of a person's life, so treating only the pain is usually not enough.

Before writing a prescription, your healthcare provider will examine you and may order tests to diagnose your medical condition. You and your healthcare provider will then make a treatment plan together.

Often, non-drug treatments like diet, prescribed exercise, lifestyle changes, counselling and physical

! Signs of opioid use disorder

If you are taking opioids for a longer period of time, tell your healthcare provider if you experience two or more of these signs. You may be developing an opioid use disorder and need your treatment reviewed.

- Taking larger amounts of the opioid or taking it for longer than intended.
- Finding it hard to stop or cut back use.
- Spending a lot of time obtaining the drug, using it, or recovering from its effects.
- Feeling a strong urge to use the drug (craving).
- Failing to meet work, home or school obligations.
- Having problems with family or friends because of taking the opioid.
- Cutting back on social, work or recreational activities that were important to you.
- Taking the opioid in situations that could be physically harmful.
- Continuing to use the opioid knowing it might be causing other health problems, or making them worse.
- Noticing the drug doesn't work as well as it used to, or needing to use more to get the same effect.

therapy will be more important than prescription medicines and surgery in improving your quality of life.

A clear goal, like returning to work or being able to do a favourite activity, may be the best way to measure progress with chronic pain.

over...

You are a partner in your own safe care.

If you take opioids while drinking alcohol or using other drugs – particularly sleep aids or drugs used to treat anxiety, insomnia or seizures – you will increase your risk of dying from drug interactions or overdose. For your safety, your healthcare provider may ask you about your drug and alcohol use. You may also be asked to provide a urine sample to check for any substances that could interfere with the opioid medicine.

Be honest with your healthcare provider about your use of alcohol and drugs.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you are taking from any source. Also tell your healthcare provider about any family history of addiction, and if you have had a problem stopping drugs in the past – an opioid medicine may not be the best choice for you, or you may need special care to watch for signs of opioid use disorder.

Before you receive a prescription for an opioid medicine, you will be asked to agree to:

- follow the treatment plan,
- see only one healthcare provider and one pharmacy for your prescription,
- take the medicine only as prescribed, never more,
- avoid alcohol and other drugs while on the medicine,
- provide a urine sample if asked,
- ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist if you are unsure about your prescription, the side-effects of the medicine or the care you receive, and
- if you see any other healthcare providers, tell them about your prescription.

Your pharmacist will make sure you get the right medicine and know how to use it safely and for the most benefit. As a member of your care team, he or she may ask you some of the same questions as your primary healthcare provider, explain how and when to take the medicine and describe what to expect, including possible side-effects. Your pharmacist will also keep a record of your use of the medicine and refill requests, and share information about your care with your primary healthcare provider.

Your healthcare provider will check in with you regularly to make sure you continue to benefit from the medicine, ask you about any side-effects you may be experiencing and adjust your treatment if necessary.

Be aware that the medicine may affect your ability to drive or do safety-sensitive work.

Opioids can affect a person's ability to drive, operate machinery or perform other safety-sensitive tasks. Ask your healthcare provider if you should avoid these activities while taking the medicine.

If you stop taking opioids for more than 2-3 days, don't start again on your own.

Contact your healthcare provider before resuming the medicine – you may need a lower dose.

Keep your medicine safe.

Opioids are strong drugs that can kill if not used responsibly, and are classified as controlled narcotics in Canada and elsewhere. To protect your family members and your community:

- keep your medicine in a locked cabinet, away from heat and moisture,
- notify police within 24 hours if it is lost or stolen,
- never share or give away your medicine, and never take anyone else's medicine, and
- return any unused medicine to a licensed pharmacy.

Questions about your treatment?

Talk to your healthcare provider. If you are not seeing a real benefit from your pain medicine in a reasonable period of time (4 weeks), you may have a pain that doesn't respond well to opioids. Discuss with your healthcare provider if your current medicine and dose are appropriate, or how to make changes slowly and safely.

For more information, call 811 Health Link.