



# Opioid medication

## Frequently asked questions

### Is it safe to take opioid medications?

Prescription opioid medications can be used to help with short-term and long-term pain. They can also be an important part of cancer treatment or end-of-life care. However, using opioids for a long time can pose serious risks that you and your doctor should discuss and monitor closely. It's very important you understand why you're being prescribed opioids.

### What are the risks of taking opioids for a long time?

- **Tolerance.** Over time, you may need higher doses to relieve your pain.
- **Dependence.** You may have withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking opioids.
- **Addiction.** You may not be able to control your opioid use.
- **Overdose or death.**

These risks increase as you take higher doses or the longer you use these pain medications, even if you take them as prescribed. Your risks also increase if you take certain other drugs, like benzodiazepines (commonly used for anxiety and sleep), or get opioids from multiple doctors and pharmacies.

### How do I safely take opioid medications?

- Always follow your doctor's directions and never share your medications with others
- Don't take your medication more often than prescribed. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you take extra doses
- Stay away from dangerous drug interactions. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about all the medications you take. Mixing opioids with any of the following can greatly add to the risk of overdose:
  - Alcohol
  - Sleeping pills (like zolpidem [Ambien®] or zaleplon [Sonata®])
  - Anxiety drugs (like diazepam [Valium®], alprazolam [Xanax®], or lorazepam [Ativan®])
- If your pain is under control, ask your doctor if you should take them less often or change to other non-opioid pain relief methods
- Keep your opioid medications in their original package and with the original labels. Store them out of reach from children where they can't be easily accessed by others (like a locked cabinet)
- Unused medications should be disposed of as soon as possible. Talk to your pharmacist for safe drug disposal options in your area

## What alternative pain management methods should I consider?

Talk to your doctor about ways to manage your pain that don't involve prescription opioids. Some of these options may work better and have fewer risks and side effects. Depending on the type of pain you're experiencing, options may include:

- Over-the-counter medications, like ibuprofen (Motrin®), acetaminophen (Tylenol®), or naproxen (Aleve®)
- Prescription-strength anti-inflammatory medications
- Some prescription non-opioid medications that target pain-producing nerves, like gabapentin (Neurontin®) or pregabalin (Lyrica®)
- Injectable and topical therapies
- Physical therapy or exercise

## What is Naloxone and is it safe to use?

Opioids can sometimes slow or even stop your breathing. This can happen if your body can't handle the amount of opioids that are in your body. Naloxone is a safe medication that can undo the effect of opioids and even save your life. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist to see if it should be prescribed to you and how to use it correctly. Naloxone may also be purchased in the pharmacy without a prescription from a physician.

## Is help available if I need it?

It's hard to admit when you have a problem or a substance use disorder. You may feel it's a weakness you need to hide. But alcohol and drug addiction are both treatable—and we can help.

Our licensed experts can:

- Listen to understand your situation
- Arrange a meeting with a recovery advocate who will create a personalized care plan for you
- Refer you to providers, treatment options and other resources
- Help make provider appointments
- Assign you a dedicated licensed Care Advocate who will provide support for up to 6 months after treatment

Get help for yourself or a loved one today. Call the Substance Use Disorder Helpline 24/7 at **1-855-780-5955** or visit **liveandworkwell.com**. For more information on using your behavioral health care benefits, call the number listed on your health plan ID card.

