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Healthy Insights

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Prescription Opioid Safety: What You Need to Know

Every day more than 115 Americans die after overdosing on opioids, as reported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Misuse and addiction to opioids is a serious national crisis that affects public health as well as social and economic welfare. It is important that opioids be used only when absolutely necessary. Talk to your doctor about other types of pain management options before taking opioids. Some examples include physical therapy, massage, acupuncture, hypnotherapy, and chiropractic care.

What is an opioid?

Opioids are strong medications used to treat pain. Even if you use them as prescribed by a doctor, opioids could lead to overdose, addiction, and/or death. Opioids cannot be expected to completely eliminate pain. Opioids come in the form of legal and illegal drugs; however, this newsletter focuses only on safe use of legal, prescription medications.

Some examples of opioid prescriptions are

- Hydrocodone (brand name examples: Lortab[®], Vicodin[®], Norco[®])
- Oxycodone (brand name example: Oxycontin[®])



- Oxymorphone (brand name example: Opana[®])
- Codeine (brand name example: Tylenol with Codeine #3[®])
- Morphine (brand name example: MS Contin[®])
- Fentanyl (brand name example: Duragesic[®])
- Methadone

Opioid overdose

Elderly and very sick people are at higher risk for an opioid overdose. Signs of opioid overdose include pinpoint pupils, slowed breathing, or loss of consciousness (“passing out”). The decreased ability to breathe, leading to “passing out,” and sometimes death, is what is referred to as an opioid overdose.*

There are opioid reversal medications that can be used to treat opioid overdose. These may be available without a prescription from your pharmacist. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if an opioid reversal medication is right for you. The pharmacist will train you and/or your care

givers on how to use it. The most common drug to treat opioid overdose is naloxone (brand name example: Narcan®). Make sure you and those around you know the signs of overdose, how to administer the opioid reversal medication, and when and how to call for emergency services. If you think you are overdosing, have someone administer an opioid reversal medication. Emergency Services (911) should be called as soon as possible, whether or not reversal medication is used. You will not be able to administer the medication to yourself. You should always tell your doctor about your opioid reversal medication use as soon as possible.



Medications or substances that can cause an opioid overdose if taken together are alcohol, benzodiazepines (examples: Valium®, Xanax®, Ativan®), sleep medications (example: Ambien®), muscle relaxants (example: Flexeril®), and other opioids. Do not stop taking or decrease your dose of any medication without talking to your doctor.

Some diseases or conditions that can worsen breathing and cause an opioid overdose are: chronic obstructive lung disease, sleep apnea, and acute illness (example: pneumonia).

Constipation is another opioid side effect that can be serious if not prevented. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about taking a laxative.

Some people also need a stool softener. Other common side effects of opioids are dizziness, sedation, nausea, vomiting and sweating.

Opioid safety tips

It is important that you always ask your pharmacist about what kind of medication you are taking, what side effects the medication could cause, and if any of your current medications might interfere with your new prescription. Please remember to tell your pharmacist about all the medications you are taking and not just the medications you get at that pharmacy.

Important points to remember

- Because they can be dangerous and addictive, opioid medications should be stored safely where others (especially children) cannot get them.
- Always take the lowest dose possible of any opioid medication.
- Never take more medication than the doctor recommends.
- Do not start a new medication without talking to your doctor or pharmacist first.
- Do not take medication that is not prescribed to you or share your medications with other people.
- Dispose of your unused or expired opioid prescriptions safely by following recommendations of the Food and Drug Administration or through your community prescription drug take back program. (For more information see link on page 3.)
- If you experience any side effects from a medication, call your doctor or pharmacist right away.
- Let your doctor or pharmacist know if you had to use an opioid reversal medication since your last doctor's appointment or pharmacy visit.

For more information, please visit

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/prescribed.html>

National Institute on Drug Abuse

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis>

U.S. Food and Drug Administration

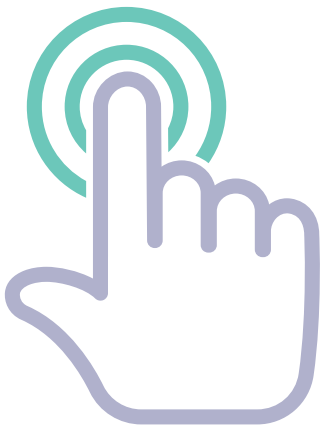
<https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/MisuseofPrescriptionPainRelievers/default.htm>

***Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Preventing an Opioid Overdose Tip Card**

<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/patients/Preventing-an-Opioid-Overdose-Tip-Card-a.pdf>

Prescription Drug Safe Disposal

<https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposalofMedicines/ucm186187.htm>



IPRO Healthy Insights is authored by Dr. Clare Bradley, IPRO's Senior Vice President/Chief Medical Officer, and a nationally recognized public health advocate.

IPRO is a non-profit organization that works with government agencies, providers and patients to measure and improve healthcare for all. For over 30 years we've made creative use of clinical expertise, emerging technology and data solutions to make the healthcare system work better.

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