

What You Need to Know about Prescription Opioids

Many people are prescribed medication when they have injured themselves or after a surgery. Frequently, these medications are prescription opioids. Prescription opioids can be very effective at reducing pain, and, for some people, improve their quality of life and ability to function.

Some commonly prescribe prescription opioids are:

- Oxycodone (OxyContin®, Percocet®)
- Hydrocodone (Vicodin®, Norco®)
- Codeine
- Oxymorphone (Opana®)
- Morphine (Kadian®, Avinza®)
- Fentanyl (Actiq®, Duragesic®)

What Is Prescription Opioid Misuse?

Prescription opioids used for pain relief are generally safe when taken for a short time and as prescribed by a doctor, but they can be misused. People misuse prescription opioids by:

- Taking the medicine in a way or dose other than prescribed
- Taking someone else's prescription medicine
- Taking the medicine for the effect it causes—to get high or experience euphoria

What Are the Risks of Taking Prescription Opioids?

There may be serious risks associated with prescription opioids. Overuse or misuse of the drugs can result in addiction, overdose, and death. The use of prescription opioids can also have a number of side effects, even when taken as directed:

- Tolerance
- Physical dependence—meaning you have symptoms of withdrawal when the medication is stopped
- Increased sensitivity to pain
- Constipation



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- Nausea, vomiting, and dry mouth
- Sleepiness and dizziness
- Confusion
- Depression
- Low levels of testosterone that can result in lower sex drive, energy, and strength
- Itching and sweating

What are the Symptoms of Tolerance, Dependence and Withdrawal?

Prescription opioids can be addictive, and people can develop tolerance and dependence when taking them.

Tolerance for prescription opioids means that the user experiences the medication as less effective at reducing pain with continued use of the same amount. It also can mean that the user needs more or a higher dosage to achieve the desired effect of pain management or intoxication.

A physical dependence on prescription opioids means that the user feels withdrawal symptoms when they stop taking the drug. These symptoms include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Hot and cold flashes
- Perspiration
- Muscle cramps
- Watery discharge from eyes and nose
- Diarrhea



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Overdose

An opioid overdose can occur for a variety of reasons, including overusing or misusing prescribed medications, using someone else's prescribed opioid, or mixing a prescription opioid with alcohol or other drugs. Opioid overdose is life-threatening and requires immediate emergency attention. Recognizing the signs of opioid overdose is essential to saving lives.

Call 911 immediately if a person exhibits any of these symptoms:

- Their face is extremely pale and/or feels clammy to the touch
- Their body goes limp
- Their fingernails or lips have a purple or blue color
- They start vomiting or making gurgling noises
- They cannot be awakened or are unable to speak
- Their breathing or heartbeat slows or stops

Naloxone is a medication that can reverse the life-threatening effects of an opioid overdose within minutes. Anyone who receives training can carry this medication and give it in the event of an overdose. Click [here](#) to learn more about naloxone and how you can potentially save someone's life in the event of an overdose.

Transition to Other Drugs

Prescription opioids are chemically similar to heroin. For some who become addicted to their prescription opioid and can no longer get it, heroin becomes an alternative. An estimated 4 to 6 percent who misuse prescription opioids transition to heroin. About 80 percent of people who use heroin first misused prescription opioids.



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SOURCES

National Institute on Drug Abuse: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/prescription-opioids>

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/prescribed.html>

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