

PERI ANESTHESIA CARE DEPARTMENT- SURGICAL SERVICES

TAKING OPIOIDS SAFELY AFTER SURGERY

Discharge Instructions: After Your Surgery

What are opioids?

This is a group of prescription pain medicines. They work by attaching to "opioid receptors" in the body and blocking pain signals.

Opioids are sometimes used when other types of pain medicine do not help enough. Opioids can help treat short-term, or "acute," pain, like after surgery or an injury. They are also sometimes used to treat long-term, or "chronic," pain, like for people with cancer. But they come with risks.

If your doctor prescribes opioid medicine, it's important to understand the risks and know how to stay safe.

What are the risks of taking opioids?

You should know:

- Opioids have side effects. Some are just bothersome, and some can be dangerous. For example, taking too much of an opioid is called an "overdose." An overdose can cause serious problems and even death.
- In some cases, taking opioids can lead to misuse. For example, people might take the medicine when they don't need it for pain. Sharing or selling opioids are other examples of misuse.
- There is a risk of addiction. This is also called "opioid use disorder."

If you take too much, or take opioids with alcohol or certain other drugs, it can cause serious harm. It can even cause death from overdose.

Know your medicines:

- Opioids come in different forms. "Immediate release" medicines work quickly and last for a short time. "Extended release" medicines work more slowly and last longer. Make sure you know what type of opioid you have. Read the label and the information that comes with the prescription.
- Follow your treatment plan carefully. Take only the dose your doctor prescribed, and no more frequently than they told you to.
- Take only the opioids prescribed for you. Do not share your "opioids" with other people.
- Some opioids come combined with other medicines like acetaminophen or an "NSAID" (like ibuprofen). Do not take any extra NSAIDs or acetaminophen without talking to your doctor or pharmacist first.
- Make sure all your doctors know every medicine you take, even those that are non-prescription. Some medicines can affect how opioids work. Bring a complete list of all your pain medicines and other medicines with you whenever you go to a doctor, nurse, dentist, or pharmacist.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is safe to take your other medicines with your opioid.

Use and store your medicine safely:

- Take the **opioids** for the shortest time you need to treat pain. *It is OK to take it for less time than prescribed if you can manage your pain with other medicines like acetaminophen (sample brand name: Tylenol) or ibuprofen (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin).*
- Do not drink alcohol while you are taking **opioids**.
- Do not take **opioids** with medicines that can make you sleepy, unless your doctor tells you to. Examples include:
 - "Benzodiazepines" like diazepam (sample brand name: Valium) or alprazolam (sample brand name: Xanax)
 - Gabapentin (sample brand name: Neurontin) or pregabalin (brand name: Lyrica)
 - Muscle relaxants like baclofen or cyclobenzaprine
 - Sleeping pills like zolpidem (sample brand name: Ambien)
- Talk to your doctor about whether it is safe to drive. **Opioids** can make you feel tired or have trouble thinking clearly. If you are starting a new prescription or taking a higher dose, you might need to avoid things like driving, using dangerous machinery, or other activities that could be risky.
- Store your **opioids** in a safe place, such as a locked cabinet. This prevents children, teens, or anyone else from getting to them.
- Never share your **opioids** with other people.

Be aware of the side effects:

- **Opioid** medicines can cause side effects. There are often ways to prevent or treat these.
- Call your doctor or nurse if you have side effects that bother you, such as:
 - **Constipation** – Your doctor or nurse might suggest you take a laxative to prevent or treat constipation. If your bowel movements are hard and dry, a stool softener might help. Drink plenty of water, and try to get regular physical activity.
 - **Mild nausea or stomach discomfort** – Taking the **opioid** with food or after eating can help with this. Nausea usually gets better with time.
 - **Severe nausea, vomiting, or itchiness** – If you have any of these, your doctor might be able to switch you to a different medicine.
- **Dry mouth**
- **Feeling dizzy or sleepy**, or having trouble thinking clearly
- **Vision problems**
- **Being clumsy, or falling down**
- Know the signs of an **opioid** overdose. Get help right away if you think you or someone else took too much of an **opioid** medicine. Signs of an overdose are listed below.

Stay safe when stopping your opioid medicine:

- When opioids are needed to treat acute pain, doctors usually try to prescribe them for only a short time. This usually means a few days or a week. They also prescribe the lowest dose possible to relieve pain.
- Follow your doctor's instructions about how to stop taking your opioid once your pain improves. Sometimes, this involves reducing the dose gradually, especially if you've been taking the opioid for more than a few days. If you stop an opioid suddenly, this can cause unpleasant symptoms like stomach ache, diarrhea, or shakes. This is called "withdrawal."
- When your pain gets better, get rid of any leftover medicine. Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist will tell you how to do this safely. This might involve flushing them down the toilet or mixing them with something like dirt or cat litter, then putting the mixture in a sealed container in the trash. Some police stations and pharmacies also take leftover medicines.

What is naloxone?

This is a medicine that reverses the effects of opioids. It can prevent death from an opioid overdose. Naloxone comes as an injection (shot), or as a spray that goes in the nose. Naloxone nasal spray (brand name: Narcan) is available without a prescription.

If you or someone you know uses opioids, it's a good idea to keep naloxone with you. Make sure you and your family and friends know how and when to use it.

When should I call for help?

If you are taking an opioid, it's important to know when to get help. Signs of an opioid overdose include:

- Extreme sleepiness
- Slow breathing, or no breathing at all
- Very small pupils (the black circles in the center of the eyes)
- Very slow heartbeat

If you took too much of your opioid medicine or think someone is having an opioid overdose:

- If you have naloxone, give it immediately. Naloxone can save a person's life. But it needs to be given as soon as possible.
- Call for an ambulance right away (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1).

Call your doctor or nurse if you:

- Are having side effects that bother you
- Have questions about how to take your medicine
- Are having trouble managing your pain