

Managing chronic pain

Understanding the use of long-acting opioid medications

Long-acting opioids are narcotic medications used for the long-term treatment of chronic pain in very limited cases. Some examples of long-acting opioids include morphine controlled release, MS Contin[®], oxycodone controlled release, and OxyContin[®]. Ongoing use of these medications can significantly raise the risk of dependence, addiction and overdose.

What is chronic pain?¹

Chronic pain is pain that lasts for over three months. The pain can be there all the time, or it may come and go. It can happen anywhere in your body. Chronic pain can interfere with your daily activities, such as working, having a social life and taking care of yourself or others. It can lead to depression, anxiety and trouble sleeping, which can make your pain worse. This response creates a cycle that's difficult to break.

Is it safe to take long-acting opioid medications?

Opioid medications are generally safe and useful for short periods of time. These medications can be an important part of treatment for certain patients, such as those with cancer or in end-of-life care. Extended use of opioids comes with serious risks that you and your doctor should monitor closely.

What alternative pain management options should I consider?

Pain relief options come in many forms and may include:

- Over-the-counter medications such as ibuprofen (Motrin[®]), acetaminophen (Tylenol[®]) or naproxen (Aleve[®])
- Prescription-strength anti-inflammatory medications such as celecoxib (Celebrex[®]), diclofenac (Voltaren[®]) and etodolac (Lodine[®])
- Some prescription non-opioid medications that target pain-producing nerves, such as gabapentin (Neurontin[®]) and pregabalin (Lyrica[®])
- Injectable and topical therapies
- Chiropractor services, physical and massage therapy, heat or cold compresses, exercise, acupuncture and cognitive behavioral therapy opioids are designed to be taken as needed. Once pain is under control, it is acceptable to take them less frequently or change to alternative options.
- Never share your medications with others.



Opioids are powerful drugs.

Opioids are powerful drugs. Today, three million people in the U.S. are opioid dependent and would meet the criteria for opioid use disorder. Despite declines from 2017 to 2019, the number of deaths involving prescription opioids rose to over 16,000 in 2020 and over 16,500 in 2021.²

What risks are associated with taking long-acting opioids?

- Tolerance – needing higher and higher doses to achieve the same effect.
- Opioid use disorder (OUD) – consists of an overpowering desire to use opioids, increased opioid tolerance, and withdrawal syndrome when discontinued. Opioid use disorder includes dependence and addiction with addiction representing the most severe form of the disorder. OUD results in over 47000 deaths per year in the U.S., which is greater than one-third of worldwide deaths attributed to OUD.³
- Overdose or death.

How do I safely take opioid medications?

- Opioids carry a risk of serious side effects even when taken as prescribed. Do not take your medication more often than prescribed. Never take extra doses without consulting your doctor or pharmacist.
- Talk with your doctor or pharmacist about all the medications you take to avoid dangerous drug interactions. Never mix opioids with alcohol, drugs that help you sleep (zolpidem and Ambien®), or anxiety medications (diazepam, Valium®, alprazolam, Xanax®, lorazepam and Ativan®). This can greatly increase the risk of overdose.
- Opioids are designed for short-term use. Once pain is under control, you can begin to take them less often or change to an alternative.
- Never share your medications with others.

How should opioid medications be stored?

Opioids can be harmful or even fatal if used by someone other than the patient they were prescribed for. Even small amounts can be dangerous to children, teens and pets. Store opioids in their original labeled packaging and keep these medications in a locked cabinet or drawer.

How should I safely dispose of opioid medications?

According to a study on behavioral factors associated with disposal of unused opioid medications, 63 percent of patients reported that they kept the unused medication.⁴ This is dangerous. For safety reasons, follow these tips to dispose of unused medications as soon as possible:

- Find a nearby pharmacy with a medication take back service by searching the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)-authorized collectors website at: deادiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback/.
- Ask your city, county or police department if they have a take back or disposal program.
- Mix the unused supply with an undesirable substance, such as cat litter or coffee grounds in a container, then place the sealed container in your trash.
- Flush unused opioid medications down the toilet. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers this an acceptable way to dispose of these medications, if the options above are not readily available.
- For more information, please refer to [Where and How to Dispose of Unused Medicines | FDA](#)

1. Chronic Pain. Cleveland Clinic website. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/chronic-pain>. (medical review date 9/1/2021)

2. NIH. National Institute on Drug Abuse

3. Dydyk AM, Jain NK, Gupta M. Opioid Use Disorder. [Updated 2022 Jun 21]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2022 Jan -. Available from: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK553166/

4. Buffington DE, Lozicki A, Alfieri T, Bond TC. Understanding factors that contribute to the disposal of unused opioid medication. J Pain Res. 2019 Feb 19;12:725-732. doi: 10.2147/JPR.S171742. PMID: 30863145; PMCID: PMC6388750.



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