

## OPIOID DICTIONARY

Let's clear up the meaning of some important words, such as addiction, tolerance, and dependence. They are sometimes used incorrectly because they are not well understood.

- **ADDICTION** - A craving that drives a person to take an opioid even though it causes harm. This is a problem that needs immediate treatment. This happens to some patients who use opioids.  
Sometimes people behave as if they are addicted, when they are really in need of more medication. This can be treated with higher doses of medicine.
- **MISUSE** - Any use of a prescription drug that is different from accepted medical practice.
- **PHYSICAL DEPENDENCE** - Withdrawal symptoms occur when regular doses of an opioid are stopped too quickly. These symptoms include restlessness, muscle and bone pain, or insomnia. Physical dependence is a normal result of taking opioids and does not result from misuse. These symptoms usually go away after a short period of time.
- **TOLERANCE** - The need for higher doses of a drug to give the same pain relief. This sometimes happens when the body gets used to an opioid. This does not mean misuse or addiction.

Opioids, the most effective pain relievers available, have been used to treat pain for thousands of years. Today, doctors prescribe opioids to treat:

- severe, short-term pain
- chronic pain (caused by a variety of conditions)
- osteoarthritis
- neuropathic pain (caused by problems with the nerves)
- cancer pain

*The goal of opioid therapy is to control pain and improve your function.*

### WHAT ARE "OPIOIDS"?

Opioids are related to opium, a natural pain-killing substance taken from poppy plants. These drugs are also sometimes called narcotics. Opioids come from plants other than poppies and are also man-made. The most commonly prescribed opioids are morphine, codeine, and oxycodone. Others include methadone, fentanyl, oxymorphone, hydrocodone, and hydromorphone.

There are two basic types of opioids:

- **short-acting** – taken for a short period of time to treat severe or sudden pain that occurs after surgery, fractures, infections, or during labor and childbirth
- **long-acting** – taken for a long period of time for "around-the-clock" relief of ongoing pain that lasts more than a few weeks or months

### HOW DO OPIOIDS WORK?

When your body is injured, your nerves send a "pain" message to your brain. Your brain tells you that you are experiencing pain. Opioids are chemicals that block your body's ability to communicate the pain. Although you still have pain, opioids keep your brain from sending your body the message.

### HOW ARE OPIOIDS TAKEN?

Patients can take opioids in several ways. The most common is by mouth. Your doctor may prescribe an opioid delivered in one of the following ways:

- **intravenously (IV)** – injected into a vein
- **subcutaneously** – an injection under the skin, into a muscle, or in the space around your spinal cord
- **transdermally** – a patch placed on the skin
- **transmucosally** – a lozenge or lollipop, placed between the cheek and gums
- **rectally** – a suppository inserted in the rectum
- **orally** – a liquid or pill taken by mouth

For greater pain relief, some opioids are combined with non-opioid drugs like aspirin or acetaminophen.



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**WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?**

Opioids can make you feel drowsy or unusually happy, or they may cause other common symptoms. The most common side effect is constipation. If this happens, your doctor may tell you to take a stool softener or laxative, add more fiber to your diet, and drink plenty of liquids. Other common side effects include:

- nausea and vomiting
- dizziness
- itching
- dry mouth
- sweating
- confusion

**WILL I BECOME ADDICTED TO OPIOIDS?**

This is a key issue for both you and your doctor to discuss. In general, people who have no history of drug abuse, including tobacco, and use their opioid medication as directed will probably not become addicted. However, patients who misuse or abuse opioids can become addicted to them, so openly discussing your concerns with your doctor is important. People who are addicted to opioids crave the “unusually happy” effect the drug has on them (a “buzz” or “high”) and will continue to use the drug even though it harms them.

**WILL I BECOME DEPENDENT ON OPIOIDS?**

Physical dependence occurs when the body becomes used to a substance in its system. If the substance is stopped abruptly or greatly reduced, withdrawal symptoms may occur. These symptoms include restlessness, muscle and bone

pain, or insomnia. However, physical dependence is normal and expected, and does not mean that you are addicted to that substance.

In the case of opioids, when it’s time to stop taking the medication, your doctor can help manage or reduce withdrawal symptoms by gradually lowering the dose over a period of time.

A person who takes opioids for pain control may need a higher dose over time to get the same relief. Sometimes more medication is needed to control increasing pain due to its underlying cause. In addition, there may be other times when the body can become “tolerant” to the drug and more of it is needed. Tolerance is a fairly slow process that develops over time. This makes opioids safe to use if you properly follow your doctor’s instructions.



**WHAT IF I WAS PREVIOUSLY ADDICTED TO A DRUG?**

A history of addiction would not rule out the use of opioid pain relievers. However, your doctor will perform a thorough assessment before opioids are prescribed and carefully monitor your treatment for any evidence of overuse or misuse. People who have abused opioids, other prescription medications, or alcohol in the past may have a greater risk of developing an addiction to opioids, so these issues must also be discussed with your doctor.

**TIPS FOR TAKING OPIOIDS**

- Follow your doctor’s instructions exactly on how to take your medicine
- Tell your doctor about all other medications you use
- Take your medicine on a regular schedule
- Do not skip doses of your medicine
- Do not drink alcohol while taking an opioid
- Tell your doctor immediately about any side effects you feel
- If your pain continues while taking the opioid, contact your doctor to adjust the dose
- Ask for a refill in plenty of time so that you do not run out
- Use the same pharmacy for all prescriptions to make sure they are always available
- Do not let others use your opioid medication
- Do not use other people’s medications

**WRITE OR CALL THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

**American Pain Society**  
 4700 W. Lake Avenue  
 Glenview, IL 60025  
 Phone: 1 (847) 375-4715  
 Web Address:  
<http://www.ampainsoc.org>

**American Academy of Pain Management**  
 13947 Mono Way #A  
 Sonora, CA 95370  
 Phone: 1 (209) 533-9744  
 Web Address:  
[www.aapainmanage.org](http://www.aapainmanage.org)

**American Pain Foundation**  
 201 North Charles Street  
 Suite 710  
 Baltimore, MD 21201  
 Phone: 1 (888) 615-PAIN (7246)  
 Web Address:  
<http://www.painfoundation.org>

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

TALK TO YOUR PHYSICIAN OR VISIT [PAINKNOWLEDGE.ORG](http://PAINKNOWLEDGE.ORG)

Newbridge Spine & Pain Center  
 Frederick (301) 668-9988  
 Waldorf (301) 638-4400  
 PrinceFrederick (410) 414-9229  
[www.NewbridgeSpine.com](http://www.NewbridgeSpine.com)