

Hypersensitivity from Opioid Pain Medicines

What is hypersensitivity?

Opioids are strong pain relief medications. When taken in low doses, they are safe and effective. Like any medicine, they have risks and side effects.

Hypersensitivity from opioid pain medicines happens when taking opioids leads to worse pain rather than pain relief. It raises the risk of becoming dependent on opioids. Your doctor may call it hyperalgesia.

What are the signs?

These are some signs of hypersensitivity:

- Pain from normally non-painful things such as stroking the skin with light pressure
- Pain that gets worse even if you take more opioids
- Pain that spreads out beyond the usual area

What are the causes?

A side effect of opioids causes you to feel extra sensitive. It may occur with any dose, but happens most often with higher doses.

How do we diagnose it?

Your doctor decides if you have hypersensitivity based on the medicines you take, your symptoms, and a physical exam.

How do we treat it?

Your doctor can treat hypersensitivity in several ways:

- Reduce or stop opioid use
- Change to another opioid with less risk of side effects
- Start taking a non-opioid pain reliever

Is hypersensitivity different from tolerance?

Yes. Tolerance means a higher dose still relieves pain somewhat for a short time. Sensitivity from opioid pain medicines means pain gets worse even with a higher dose.

Only your doctor can change your pain medicine dose.

Never take more or less pain medicine than your doctor prescribes.

Supportive Oncology and Survivorship (SOS) Service

The SOS Service at Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI) provides support for cancer patients, including help with pain management and other symptoms or concerns.

The SOS Service has specialists from several HCI clinics and programs:

- Supportive Oncology Clinic
- Linda B. and Robert B. Wiggins Wellness and Integrative Health Center
- Patient and Family Support (social workers)
- Spiritual Care Services (chaplain)

Call the SOS Service at 801-213-4246, with questions or concerns, Monday - Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.