

Opioids are medicines that ease pain. When taken in low doses, they are safe and effective. Like any medicine, they have risks and side effects. They can even be deadly if not taken as directed. Here are important things to know about taking opioids:

- Follow your doctor's directions for taking this medicine. If you have questions, call your doctor or pharmacy.
- Tell your doctor and pharmacist all the prescription and over-the-counter medicines you take.
- Do NOT do these things while taking opioids, unless your doctor approves:
 - Drink alcohol
 - Use illegal drugs
 - Take sleep aids or muscle relaxants
- Never take medications not prescribed to you.
- **If an overdose happens, call 911 immediately.**

Sedation

Opioids can make you very tired and sleepy. This is called sedation. It raises your risk of falls and accidents that can cause severe injury.

Avoid doing these things until you know how opioids affect you:

- Driving
- Using heavy machinery
- Making important decisions

Accidental Overdose or Death

An accidental overdose can cause death. Combining opioids with other substances that make you sleepy is very dangerous. Avoid these substances when you take opioids:

- Alcohol
- Certain anti-anxiety and seizure medications
- Muscle relaxants
- Sleep aids

Tell your doctor all the medicines you take. Never drink alcohol or use illegal drugs with opioids. **If an overdose happens, call 911.**

Constipation

Constipation means having hard bowel movements that don't happen often. It is one of the most common side effects of opioid use. Using laxatives or stool softeners is often the best way to manage it.

If these remedies don't help, your health care team will recommend other methods such as suppositories or enemas.

Low Sex Hormones

Hormones such as testosterone and estrogen tend to be lower in patients taking opioids. In men, this can cause less sex drive or difficulty getting an erection. In women, menstrual cycles may stop during long-term use of oral or skin patch opioids.

Dependence

If you take opioids every day, your body begins to rely on them. This is called physical dependence. If you suddenly stop taking them, your body will go through withdrawal. This is not dangerous, but it is very uncomfortable. It makes you feel like you have the flu.

Dependence is not something you can control. It does not mean you are addicted to opioids. It is simply the body's natural response to opioids. It is very important to take the dose your doctor prescribes.

Tolerance

Many patients taking opioids for a long time have to keep raising their dose to get the same pain relief. The body becomes less sensitive to the drug. This is called tolerance.

Higher doses of opioids leads to a greater risk of side effects. In addition, at some point even higher doses will not relieve pain. If this happens, talk with your doctor about other ways to manage pain.

Sensitivity from Opioid Pain Medicines

Long-term opioid use may actually make pain worse. The medicine makes the body extra sensitive to usually non-painful things. Taking more opioids will make pain worse or cause pain in other areas of the body.

Central Sleep Apnea

Central sleep apnea can develop with opioid use. Sleep apnea happens when you stop breathing for short periods of time during sleep. The risk of central sleep apnea goes up with higher doses of opioids. The risk also goes up when opioids are combined with alcohol, illegal drugs, and other medicines that cause sleepiness.

Central sleep apnea can keep you from getting enough sleep. This leaves you feeling tired during the day. Your sleep patterns may change as a result.

Lung and Heart Problems

Opioids can slow your breathing. Over time, this can damage the heart and lungs because you aren't getting enough air. The risk goes up with higher doses of opioids. The risk also goes up when opioids are combined with alcohol, illegal drugs, and other medicines that cause sleepiness.

If you take too much opioid medication, you can stop breathing. If this happens, you or a caregiver should call 911 right away.

The side effects of some medicines don't appear until hours or days after taking them. For example, methadone can cause trouble breathing and irregular heart rhythms. These can be fatal.

Call your doctor right away if you have trouble breathing or your heart rate changes.

Dry Mouth

Opioid use can make your mouth dry. Normally, saliva flushes germs that cause tooth decay from your mouth.

With short-acting opioids, dry mouth lasts only a short time. But with long-acting opioids, dry mouth can last much longer.

You can use sugar-free hard candies to help ease dry mouth. You can also find remedies at the pharmacy. Choose products that have xylitol.

Good dental hygiene can help. Brush and floss your teeth often. Visit your dentist regularly to check for tooth decay or other problems.

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.

Specialists from several HCI clinics and programs are part of the SOS Service:

- 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.