

Side Effects and Risks of Opioid Use for Chronic Pain

Opioids are medicines that ease pain. They are safe and effective when taken in low doses. 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. Call your doctor or pharmacy if you have questions.
- 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 that aren't yours.
- **Call 911 immediately if an overdose happens.**

Accidental Overdose or Death

An accidental overdose can cause death. Combining opioids with other substances that make you sleepy is very dangerous.

Tell your doctor all the medicines you take. Never drink alcohol or use illegal drugs with opioids. Call 911 if an overdose happens.

Naloxone

The opioid reversal agent, naloxone, is available from most pharmacies without a prescription, but can also be prescribed by your doctor. If you are concerned about an overdose, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about having naloxone available at home.

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 driving, using heavy machinery, and making important decisions until you know how opioids affect you.

Constipation

Constipation means having hard bowel movements that do not 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. Suppositories or enemas may help if the options above do not work.

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

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

You cannot control dependence. It does not mean you are addicted to opioids. It is simply the body's natural response to opioids. It is very important to follow your doctor's instructions.

Tolerance

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

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

Addiction

Addiction is when you cannot control the use of opioid medications. Addiction is a serious risk of taking opioids. You might have an addiction if you notice the following signs:

- You take more medicine than your doctor tells you to.
- You crave the medicine.
- You keep taking the medicine, even when it hurts your family, health or work, or causes you to have risky or illegal behaviors.

Addiction could be deadly and you need help from a specialist. If you are worried about addiction, talk with your doctor right away.

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 during sleep. The risk of central sleep apnea goes up with higher doses of opioids. The risk also goes up when opioids combine 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 are not getting enough air. The risk goes up with higher doses of opioids. The risk also goes up when opioids combine with alcohol, illegal drugs, and other medicines that cause sleepiness.

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

The side effects of some medicines do not 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.

Dry mouth lasts only a short time with short acting opioids. However, 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 help 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.