

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 ongoing pain that keeps returning, or lasts longer than the normal course of healing. It may be related to an ongoing medical condition or continue even after an injury or illness has been treated. Chronic pain can last from months to years, and can have a negative effect on a person's well-being and ability to perform everyday tasks. Common types of chronic pain include back pain, cancer pain, arthritis pain and nerve pain.

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 powerful drugs. Today, more than two million people find themselves unable to stop using these prescription medications. More than 1,000 individuals per day are treated in emergency rooms for prescription opioid overdose. Almost 10 percent of these individuals do not survive.^{2,3}

What risks are associated with taking long-acting opioids?

- Tolerance — Needing higher and higher doses to achieve the same effect.
- Dependence — Having symptoms of withdrawal when the medication is stopped. Symptoms of dependence can begin to occur less than a week after starting opioid therapy.⁴
- Addiction — Becoming dependent on a medication and not able to control use.
- 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 national study, almost 60 percent of Americans have opioid painkillers that they no longer use stored at home.⁵ 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: deaddiversion.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.

1. Chronic Pain. Cleveland Clinic website. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/chronic-pain>. Accessed October, 2017.

2. NIH. National Institute on Drug Abuse

3. MMWR / March 17, 2017 / Vol. 66 / No. 10

4. HCUP Fast Stats, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

5. JAMA Intern Med. 2016; 176(7):1027-1029



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