

TAKING OPIOIDS RESPONSIBLY

for Your Safety
and the Safety of Others

Patient Information Guide
on Opioids
for Chronic Pain



VA National Pain Management Program
VA National Center for Ethics in Health Care

Patient Information: Taking Opioids Responsibly

At VA we are concerned about your pain and committed to providing you with the best possible care. This includes ensuring your safety and the safety of others.

This patient information guide explains what you need to know about opioids.

Opioids are medications that are sometimes used to treat pain. Opioids are also called “opiates” or “narcotics.” Opioids can be dangerous if they are not taken responsibly. This guide explains how VA uses opioids and how to take opioids safely.

VA providers will discuss your treatment with you before they treat you with opioids for chronic pain. They will discuss the goals for your treatment and how much relief you can expect. They will also discuss possible side effects and other risks from opioids.

Opioids don’t work for everyone. Opioids may reduce your pain, but they may not take it all away. Opioids may not work for you or your provider may decide they are unsafe for you. If this happens, your opioids will be slowly lowered and then stopped. You will continue to get other treatments for your pain.

YOUR PAIN CARE PLAN

Opioids alone are not enough to treat your pain. Opioids are part of a pain care plan that uses other things to manage pain, such as:

- Heat and cold therapy (heating pads, ice packs)
- Self-care techniques
- Exercise
- Weight loss
- Massage
- Acupuncture
- Chiropractic
- Nerve stimulation
- Relaxation or stress reduction training
- Physical therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Mental health treatment
- Stretching
- Counseling and coaching
- Meditation
- Rehabilitation
- Non-opioid pain medicines (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, antidepressants, anticonvulsants)
- Injections
- Specialist pain care
- Surgery
- Pain classes
- Support groups
- Attention to proper sleep

Any one of these can help to reduce pain, but they may work better together.

TAKING OPIOIDS RESPONSIBLY

Opioids can be dangerous. Your provider can only prescribe them safely if you follow these “dos and don’ts” for taking opioids responsibly.

1. DO take your opioid and non-opioid pain medicines as prescribed.

Make sure you take the right dose of medicine at the right time. Don’t avoid taking your pain medicine to save it for a later time.

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2. **DON'T take extra doses.**

If you take extra doses on your own, you may get very sick or die from an opioid overdose. You may also run out of your opioids before you can get your next refill. This may lead to withdrawal symptoms (see list below). Your provider will usually deny requests for early refills. This protects you and the public from harm due to opioid abuse and addiction. If you have severe, increased, or new pain, don't just take more of your opioids. Call your pain care provider to decide on the best care.

3. **DO inform all of your providers if you are currently taking opioids.**

4. **DO tell your usual VA provider if you get an opioid prescription from another provider.**

You might get an opioid prescription from another provider (for example, for an injury or after surgery). If this happens, you should tell your VA provider within one business day.

5. **DO tell your VA provider about anything else you are taking.**

Tell your VA provider about medicines or supplements you are getting from non-VA providers. This includes the marijuana prescribed by a non-VA provider. Also tell your VA provider about anything you are taking on your own. Your VA provider will talk to you about any safety concerns and change your care plan as needed.

6. **DO tell your provider if you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant.**

Taking opioids or other medications during pregnancy may be harmful your unborn baby. Tell your provider if you think you might be pregnant, if you know you are pregnant, or if you are planning to become pregnant. Your provider will discuss the options for safe pain management during your pregnancy with you. Your provider may change your care plan to protect your health and the health of your unborn baby.

7. **DON'T stop taking opioids on your own.**

If you stop taking opioids suddenly, you may have withdrawal symptoms. If your provider asks you to *slowly decrease* your use of opioids, follow their advice. This will help reduce withdrawal symptoms and prevent you from feeling sick.

Tell your provider if you think you are having withdrawal symptoms. Your provider may be able to give you medicine for a short time to help control them.

Withdrawal symptoms can include:

Belly cramps	Trouble sleeping	Feeling very tired
Tears in your eyes	Diarrhea	Loss of appetite
“Goose bumps” (chills)	Anxiety	Extra saliva
Muscle aches / cramps	Sweats	Runny nose
Nausea and vomiting	Increased blood pressure	Increased heart rate

8. **DO be cautious about driving or operating machinery.**

Never drive or operate machinery if you feel sleepy or confused. State laws may limit the jobs you can do when you are taking opioids. It may be illegal for you to drive a truck or public vehicle like a bus.

9. DON'T drink alcohol or take "street" drugs.

It is not safe to drink alcohol or use illegal "street drugs" when you are taking opioids. They can cause severe harm or death. Some drugs can interfere with your pain care or opioids. If you abuse alcohol or use street drugs, your provider will encourage you to get treatment for this problem, and may stop prescribing opioids. You will still get treatment for your pain and other conditions.

Illegal "street" drugs include

- Cocaine
- Heroin
- LSD
- Marijuana that is not authorized by a provider **NOTE:** *It is illegal for patients to possess marijuana on Federal property; this includes all VA facilities.*
- Diverted ("black market") prescription drugs (e.g., opioids, benzodiazepines, methamphetamine, other controlled substances, and steroids)
- Inhalants (e.g., glue, solvents, lighter fluid)
- Methamphetamine or MDMA / Ecstasy

10. DO get help from your friends and family.

Your friends and family may be able to help you manage your opioids safely. Your provider may ask you to talk to your friends and family members about opioids. Your provider may ask for your permission to contact your family about your pain care.

11. DON'T sell or give away your opioids.

Don't let any other people take or use your medicines. This is dangerous. It is also illegal and can lead to criminal charges. So keep your medicines in a safe and secure place. The VA may not replace doses that are lost, stolen, or shared with others. If this happens, your provider may stop opioids completely.

MANAGING SIDE EFFECTS AND OTHER RISKS

Possible Side Effects

It is important to report any side effects to your provider. Tell your provider if side effects interfere with your daily activities. This information will help your provider better manage your pain.

1. Sleepiness or "slow thinking"

Opioids can impair your judgment and cause problems with how you make decisions. Sleepiness may lessen over time. Caffeine may help you feel more awake.

2. Mental confusion, bad dreams, or hallucinations

Your provider may need to change your dose or medicine to treat these side effects.

3. Constipation

This is a common side effect that may not go away. Your provider may give you laxatives to improve bowel movements. Exercise, eating more fiber, and drinking more water may also help. Severe constipation can cause intestinal blockage, so you should see your provider if constipation is severe.

4. Itching

Itching is rare. It usually occurs early in treatment. Your provider may need to change your opioids and order medicine to treat itching.

5. Sweating

Wearing light clothes may help decrease sweating.

6. Nausea and vomiting

These can occur early or late in treatment. They usually go away in time. Your provider may give you medicines to help control nausea.

7. Decreased sex hormones

Opioids may decrease sex hormones and your desire to have sex. If you are a man, opioids may decrease your ability to have an erection. Decreased sex hormones may also cause depression, anxiety, tiredness, hot flushes, and night sweats. It can also cause loss of muscle mass, weakness, osteoporosis (brittle bones), and bone fractures. Women may have irregular or no menstrual periods. Use effective birth control methods to prevent pregnancy during opioid treatment. Tell your provider if you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. Opioids may harm your baby if you take opioids while you are pregnant.

8. Dry mouth that can cause tooth decay

Dry mouth is common. It may help to chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candy or ice chips. Your provider may give you medicine. If you have dry mouth for a long time, you should see your dentist to check for dental problems.

9. Allergies

Allergic reactions to opioids are rare. If you get a rash or hives call your provider right away, or call 911. If you get short of breath, have throat swelling, or feel like you may pass out, tell someone to call 911 right away.

Possible Other Risks from Opioids

1. Sleep apnea

Sleep apnea is abnormal breathing pauses during sleep. This is serious. Your provider may:

- Ask you about your sleep habits.
- Order tests to check if you are at risk for sleep apnea.

If you have sleep apnea your provider may:

- Advise you to use only non-opioid pain treatments.
- Prescribe a breathing machine for you to use when you go to sleep.
- Advise you to avoid alcohol and medicines that make sleep apnea worse.

2. Worsening of pain

For some people, opioids may actually make pain worse.

3. Impaired driving

Opioids may affect your ability to drive a car or use machines safely.

- Never drive or operate machinery if you feel sleepy or confused.
- State laws may limit the jobs you can do when you are using opioids.
- It may be illegal for you to drive a truck or public vehicle like a bus.

4. Tolerance

Over time, you may need higher doses of opioids to get the same pain relief. This may increase other risks.

5. Withdrawal symptoms (physical dependence)

Your body will get used to taking opioids and you may suffer withdrawal symptoms if you suddenly stop taking opioids, taper them too quickly, or take a drug that blocks their effects. People who take opioids for a long enough time become physically dependent on them. This is NOT the same as addiction.

6. Addiction

Addiction means there is a craving for a substance and the craving gets out of control. Some patients get addicted to opioids even when they take opioids as prescribed. If you show any signs of addiction, your provider is likely to refer you to an addiction specialist.

- Your provider and addiction specialist may cut back on your dose or stop opioids.
- They may prescribe non-opioid medicines and other treatments.

7. Drug interactions

Sometimes there are problems if you take two drugs together. Tell your provider about all of the pills you take. This includes prescriptions, over the counter drugs, herbs, and vitamins.

8. Immune system changes

Your body's immune system helps fight infections. Opioids may make the immune system work poorly. Taking opioids long-term may result in infections or immune-related illnesses.

9. Birth Defects

Taking opioids during early pregnancy can cause rare birth defects. If you are or plan to become pregnant, talk to your provider about your pain treatment options.

10. Death

Opioids are one of the main prescription drugs associated with deaths in the U.S. Death may be more likely when you take larger doses of opioids.

FILLING OPIOID PRESCRIPTIONS

- Ask your provider how to refill or renew your opioid prescriptions.
- If there is a problem getting your opioids by mail at your address, you may have to fill your opioid prescriptions in person. If you fill your prescriptions in person, some providers want you to contact them at least 3 business days before your opioid prescription is due.

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- If your opioid prescription has a refill, you may
 - Order a refill by mail, or
 - Order a refill through My HealthVet (<http://www.myhealth.va.gov>). You must be verified to use the prescription refill part of My HealthVet.
- When ordering by mail,
 - Contact your provider or pharmacy at least 10 business days before it is due.
 - Make sure that you or someone you trust gets the package when it is delivered.
- Plan ahead! The pharmacy may be closed on weekends, holidays, and after regular clinic hours.

PROTECT YOUR OPIOIDS FROM DAMAGE, LOSS, OR THEFT

- Keep your opioids in a safe, locked place, out of reach of family, children, visitors, and pets.
- Always store your opioids in the original labeled container.
- If you travel, carry the current bottle of opioids with you for safety. This will help you answer any questions about your medicine.
- If you are concerned about the safety of storing medicines in your home, talk to your provider.
- If someone steals your opioids or your opioid prescription, report the theft to the police. Give this report to your provider if you need a new prescription or early refill.

WORKING TOGETHER WITH YOUR PROVIDER

- Be honest with the health care team and treat them with respect. The team will be honest with you and treat you with respect as well.
- Be honest and complete when you report your health, drug, and alcohol history. You should also tell your provider about drug or alcohol use in your family.
- Speak up about your questions and concerns! Your provider wants to answer questions.
- Tell all of your providers about opioid prescriptions from other providers and where you get the prescriptions filled.
- Emergency rooms and urgent care clinics are not good places to get treatment for chronic pain. If you have to go to an emergency room, tell the doctor about your pain care plan.
- Follow your pain care plan. Your pain care plan may include certain tests and other ways to manage your pain. Do all the things that you and your provider agree to as part of your plan.
- When you start taking opioids, you may need to meet with your doctor at least once per month. Later you may need to meet every 3 or 6 months. Try to keep all of your pain care and other clinic visits if possible. When you take opioids you should give the VA a phone number and address so we can reach you. Please update your contact information at every visit.
- With your consent, your provider and other health care team members may order urine, saliva, or blood tests. These tests are to make sure your opioids get into your body. In some people, the body does not absorb opioids well. The tests also check if your urine or blood contains

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drugs not prescribed for you like “street” drugs and alcohol. The VA does not use these tests for law enforcement or employment purposes. The results of these tests may cause your provider to talk to you about keeping or changing your plan.

IF YOU HAVE TO STOP OPIOIDS

- Your provider may stop your opioids because they are not helping you or because of addiction, abuse, or misuse. If this happens, your provider will treat your pain or substance use problems in other ways.
- If you have to stop your opioids, your provider will try to prevent or control any withdrawal symptoms. This typically, but not always, requires slowly lowering the dose.
- If you have extra opioids left over from your prescription, you should get rid of them. Your provider or pharmacist will tell you how to do this safely.

PRESCRIPTION DRUG MONITORING PROGRAMS

- For your safety, your provider and pharmacist will track when you renew and refill opioids both within VA and, when allowed or required by state law, outside VA.
- Most states have programs that track prescription drugs to identify inappropriate or unsafe use. VA and these programs may obtain and share information about you without your specific consent.

At VA, we are committed to treating your pain in a way that ensures your safety and the safety of others. If you have any questions, please contact your VA provider.

