

Staying Safe When Taking Prescription Opioids

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Quick Facts

- Prescription opioids, made from opium poppy plants or synthetically in a lab, are often used for short-term pain management.
- Opioids bind to opioid receptors in the brain, restricting pain signals and causing the body to relax.
- A person can build a tolerance to opioids, which can lead to developing an opioid use disorder.
- Too much of an opioid can lead to brain damage or death.

Introduction

Opioid use and the dangers that can come from it are becoming more common. People can get opioids legally or illegally (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2021). Prescription opioids are often used for short-term pain management, and it is important to know how to keep yourself safe when taking opioids prescribed by a doctor (NIDA, 2021).

What Are Opioids?

Opioids are a type of drug that comes from the opium poppy plant or are made in a lab synthetically (NIDA, 2021). There are several diverse types of medications within the opioid class, but most commonly, they are used to relieve pain and relax the body (NIDA, 2021; Oesterle, 2021). The most common prescription opioids are (Oesterle, 2021):

- Morphine

- Fentanyl
- Codeine
- Hydrocodone
- Oxycodone

How Do Opioids Work in the Body?

Opioid medication enters the brain and binds to opioid receptors. This restricts pain signals and causes the body to relax (Oesterle, 2021). Low doses of opioids can make a person sleepy, but larger doses can cause an individual to relax so much that their heart rate and breathing decrease. A person may also feel euphoric effects (intense happiness) when taking opioids or build a tolerance to them, which may lead to some individuals developing an opioid use disorder (Oesterle, 2021). Opioids can be dangerous when not used as prescribed by a doctor. When too much of an opioid is in a person's body, they may experience a lack of oxygen to the brain, which can lead to brain damage or death (NIDA, 2021).

How Do People Become Dependent on Opioids?

Opioids not only relieve pain but can also create euphoric feelings, increasing the potential for those taking opioids to develop a psychological and physical dependence on them (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Not every individual who uses opioids will experience the same effects, nor will they develop an opioid use disorder, but some individuals who use opioids chronically or regularly may quickly build a tolerance to the drug, meaning they need larger doses to produce the same intensity of effects (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Using opioids in an unprescribed way can lead to continued desires, strong cravings, and compulsions for the prescription even when it causes negative consequences (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Additionally, withdrawal symptoms are often unpleasant, reinforcing these dependencies when individuals stop or reduce their dosage suddenly (Cleveland Clinic, 2022).



Figure 1. Signs and Symptoms of an Opioid Overdose
Credit: Chapel Taylor-Olson

How Can a Person Experience an Overdose From Opioids?

An overdose can occur when a person takes too much of an opioid, causing an individual's breathing to slow or stop (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). An overdose can result from an individual accidentally or intentionally taking an extra dose of their prescription, taking their prescription too often, mixing their prescription with other medications or alcohol, taking someone else's prescription (such as children accidentally finding and taking medicine not intended for them), or taking an opioid for the pleasant euphoric feelings they can bring (Cleveland, n.d.). Figure 1 shows the signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose. If someone exhibits these signs after taking an opioid, it's vital to call 911 so the person receives medical care as soon as possible.

What Can You Do to Limit the Dangers of Prescription Opioids?

There are many things that can be done to safely use or store prescription opioids. The Cleveland Clinic (2022) and Robeznieks (2018) recommend the following:

- Strictly follow your doctor's instructions.
- Use the pill as intended; do not alter it (e.g., cutting it in half or crushing it).
- Do not operate vehicles or machinery while using opioids.
- Do not give others your prescribed opioids or take another person's prescription.
- Store medications in their original packaging and, preferably, in a locked cabinet out of children's reach.
- Dispose of unused or old medication at a local drop box or police station.

Additionally, individuals can choose alternatives to manage their pain including:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)
- Yoga/Tai chi
- Mindfulness
- Physical therapy, stretching, or other forms of physical activity

Learn more about evidence-based alternatives for pain management in the Utah State University (USU) Extension fact sheet "[Evidence-Based Alternative Pain Management Techniques for Chronic Pain](#)" (Condie et al., 2020).

Harm Reduction

In 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommended that doctors consider prescribing naloxone to patients who receive an opioid prescription. Naloxone (or Narcan®) is an opioid overdose reversal medication that can temporarily stop an opioid overdose by blocking opioids from attaching to receptors in the brain (NIDA, 2022). Learn more about naloxone and its benefits in the USU Extension fact sheet "[Naloxone: A Lifesaving Tool Against Opioid Overdose](#)" (Hunt et al., 2025).

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