

Opioids: Risks and Alternatives

What are opioids?

Opioids, also known as narcotics, are medications used to control moderate to severe pain. They should mainly be used for short-term pain control following surgery or an injury and with certain conditions such as cancer.

There are many different opioids available with varying strengths. Here are some common prescription opioids:

Generic Example	Brand Name
Acetaminophen-codeine	Tylenol with Codeine No. 3
Fentanyl	Duragesic
Hydrocodone	Zohydro ER
Hydrocodone-acetaminophen	Lortab, Norco, Vicodin
Hydromorphone	Dilaudid
Methadone	Methadose
Morphine	MS Contin
Oxycodone	Oxycontin
Oxycodone-acetaminophen	Endocet, Percocet

What are the side effects and risks of prescription opioids?

Even when taken as directed, prescription opioids may cause side effects such as:

- Confusion
- Constipation
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Itching and sweating
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sleepiness

Repeated use can lead to opioid tolerance, which means your pain won't respond to the medication. This may require more opioids at a higher dosage.

Opioid dependence may develop even after taking prescription opioids for a short period. Suddenly stopping the medication may result in unpleasant withdrawal symptoms.

Prolonged use of opioids carry even more serious risks such as:

- Accidental overdose and death
- Addiction
- Difficulty breathing (especially while sleeping)
- Fractures



What else can I do to treat pain?

There are many alternatives to opioids to treat pain, some of which may work better with fewer side effects. Talk to your doctor to see if there's a non-opioid medication that's appropriate for you.

Over-the-counter medications like Tylenol (acetaminophen), Advil (ibuprofen), and Aleve (naproxen) are not covered by the plan but may be purchased at retail stores without a prescription.

Some examples of treatment options covered by your plan include:

- Non-opioid prescriptions such as:
 - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) (e.g., celecoxib)
 - Topical anesthetics (e.g., lidocaine)
 - Musculoskeletal therapy agents (e.g., baclofen)
 - Some antidepressants (e.g., duloxetine) and anticonvulsants (e.g., gabapentin) that also relieve pain
- Nonpharmacological therapies such as physical therapy, acupuncture, joint injection procedures, and chiropractic services.
- Devices such as a transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulator, often referred to as TENS.

How can I take opioids safely?

If your doctor determines that opioid treatment is necessary, it's very important that you:

- Take your prescription opioid exactly as your doctor instructs. **Never take opioids in greater amounts or more often than prescribed.**
- Take opioids for the shortest amount of time possible.
- Don't share your medication with anyone.
- Don't drive or participate in activities that require mental alertness until you know how the drug affects you.
- Avoid taking opioids with medications such as benzodiazepines, muscle relaxants, or hypnotics because it increases the risk of an overdose.

Learn more at [cdc.gov/overdose-prevention/manage-treat-pain/patients-faqs.html](https://www.cdc.gov/overdose-prevention/manage-treat-pain/patients-faqs.html).