

What You Need to Know about Opioids



Opioids include illicit drugs like heroin and licit prescription pain relievers like oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine, methadone, fentanyl, and others.

Opioids interact with the nervous system to relieve pain. Many users will experience extremely pleasurable effects from them, and risk of addiction.

Update, Facts, and Figures

Of the 20.5 million Americans 12 or older who had a substance use disorder in 2015, 2 million involve prescription pain relievers, and 25% of these people are also heroin addicts.

Drug overdose is currently the leading cause of accidental death in the United States. About 2/3 of these are from painkillers, and a 1/3 are from heroin. The CDC estimates one in four patients prescribed opioids *is currently addicted*.

Problems Cause Problems

Most people obtain opioid-based prescriptions legitimately from a doctor when they experience moderate to severe pain. As more people have become addicted to opioids, prescriptions have become more difficult to acquire. In April 2017, drugstores nationwide were struggling to supply customers with even codeine-based cough syrup due to a national backorder.

Lack of legitimate medication has contributed to increased drug-seeking behaviors by those addicted to pain medications.

Heroin on the streets can be easier and cheaper to buy than prescription pain relievers, and it is often purer. This has led to a severe rise in heroin-related deaths in the U.S., which have tripled in the last six years!

In 2014 and 2015, drug deaths linked to fentanyl were particularly high. (Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid similar to morphine, but is 50 to 100 times more potent!)

The current epidemic didn't start in dark alleys on the wrong side of town, but in well-meaning doctors' offices. Originally, post-surgical patients or those undergoing cancer treatment were prescribed opioids to help manage moderate to severe pain, the CDC explains. Over time, physicians began writing prescriptions for long term use of these powerful medications for people with problems such as chronic arthritic pain—which started the epidemic. New CDC prescribing guidelines now encourage doctors to prescribe pain medication short term, and to take precautions to prevent patients from abusing medication.

Be sure you understand the long-term effects of using opioids so you can avoid unwittingly getting addicted. Note: If you have a family history of drug/alcohol addiction, consider using a medical doctor who is certified by the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM.org) to manage pain medications if you require them.

Signs, Symptoms, and Risk Factors

Symptoms of addiction include developing tolerance and need for a stronger dose. Physical withdrawal may ensue when stop taking the drug. And some patients also experience more sensitivity to pain than before they took opioids.

Risk factors for addiction include:

- History of mental illness or substance abuse.
- Living in a rural area (lack of non-medical pain management alternatives makes prescription use more likely).
- A low income (illicit opioids may be cheaper, and therefore sought more read-

ily. Additionally, some studies show lower income persons experience more pain-related health conditions).

Opioid Addiction Requires Treatment

Involve the entire family in learning about addictive disease to prevent enabling. Although addicts must learn to manage their continuing abstinence from opioids and psychoactive drugs (including alcohol) to improve their chances of survival, concerned loved ones without education risk behaving in ways that can provoke relapse.

Do's and Don'ts

- Discuss the long-term effects of opioid use with your doctor.
- Ask if other medications for pain are available that are less addictive—or ask about nonmedical pain management alternatives. (Not all doctors will initiate such discussions with you.)
- Always take prescription medication as it's prescribed. If you notice a reduced effect, phone your medical doctor. *Do not* take "just a little bit more."
- If a family member or friend appears addicted to a pain medication, do not enable him or her with money or by helping him or her obtain prescriptions.

Make the EAP Your First Stop

Does your employer sponsor an employee assistance program (EAP)? If so, it is free and confidential. Use it to seek help for yourself or someone you know struggling with any personal problem, including opioid addiction.