



## How to Prevent Opioid Drug Misuse

According to the New England Journal of Medicine, more than 11 million Americans misuse prescription opioid painkillers every year, and 130 people die from an opioid overdose every day in our country.

Opioid painkillers are medicines prescribed by doctors to treat moderate to severe pain for health conditions that cause ongoing discomfort, as well as for pain following surgery or injury. When used properly, prescription opioid drugs can work to relieve pain. But they can also have serious side effects and risks.

Some common prescription opioids include:

- Oxycodone
- Morphine
- Hydrocodone
- Oxymorphone
- Codeine
- Fentanyl

If you are not sure if your medicine is an opioid, check your prescription labels to look for generic names. If you are not able to find the name or have questions, you should ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist.

When taking prescription opioids, always avoid risk factors associated with the drug(s), including:

- Mixing opioids with other medications, drugs, nutritional supplements, or alcohol
- Taking more than prescribed
- Taking a high daily dose of opioids

- Certain conditions such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, HIV, sleep apnea, or liver or lung disease
- Pregnancy
- Older age
- Family history of substance abuse

Let your doctor know if you or your loved ones have any of these risk factors before filling any opioid prescription. It is important to understand the risks, and you may want to discuss possible alternatives.

There are other things we all can do to help combat the problem. Here are some things you can begin doing now to help end this deadly epidemic.

## Know the Signs and Symptoms of Overdose

Recognizing that someone has overdosed on an opioid drug can be difficult. If you are not sure, always call 911 or seek immediate emergency medical care. Some of the signs of an overdose are:

- Small, constricted, pinpoint pupils
- Falling asleep or passing out
- Slow and shallow breathing
- Choking
- Having blue, pale, or cold skin

## Dispose of Leftover Prescription Medication

Keeping unused prescription medication for future use is not a good idea. Safe disposal of leftover opioids can help prevent misuse, and

is an important way of helping to reduce the opioid epidemic. Always follow the disposal directions you received with your medicines, and if you did not get directions, ask your healthcare provider.

Some medicines can be flushed, and the FDA provides a list of medications recommended for flushing at: [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov). Some medicines can be combined with dirt, kitty litter, or used coffee grounds and placed in a sealed bag before discarding. There are also many programs available that accept unused medicines. You can find the disposal locations in your area at:

<https://againstopioidabuse.org/disposal-locations/>.

### **Use Safe Storage Methods**

Safely storing your prescription opioids is important, because more than 50% of people who misused narcotic painkillers in 2018 said they were given the drugs by a relative or friend, and 4% said they stole it from a friend or relative.

Always monitor carefully the medicine you take and know exactly how much you have left so you can tell if any is missing. Be sure to store all opioid medicines in their original packaging and keep them locked in a lockbox or storage cabinet. Make sure these medications are out of the reach of children!

### **Educate Yourself, Your Family, and Friends**

It is important to be aware of the rights, risks, and responsibilities associated with narcotic painkiller use. Learn about how to safely and properly use, store, and dispose of opioid-based medicines, and share this information with family and friends. If you have questions, don't hesitate to ask your doctor or pharmacist about prescription opioids.

Here are the 3 questions patients should ask their doctor when discussing pain management and prescription opioids:

1. Is this medication an opioid?
2. What are the side effects and my risk of addiction?
3. Are there other pain management options?

There are other options for dealing with pain. Alternative options—such as over-the-counter pain medications (acetaminophen or ibuprofen), therapeutic exercise, physical therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness meditation, biofeedback, acupuncture, and massage—may be effective at reducing pain.

If your doctor has prescribed an opioid pain reliever and you are worried about overprescribing, you might want to seek advice from another healthcare provider or pharmacist.