



Opioid Medication: Risks and Your Safety

Please read this important information before signing the **Opioid Medication Agreement**.

Opioid treatment goals

Opioid therapy is intended to:

- Improve your ability to do daily activities, such as walking, cooking, working, exercising, and socializing.
- Help manage your pain.

When taken as prescribed, opioids can be an effective part of a pain management plan. Keep in mind they don't work for every person or type of pain. No medication can stop pain completely. When taking opioids, special monitoring is needed for your safety.

It's important to know that opioids:

- Have safety risks such as overdose and other potential harmful side effects.
- Can interact with other prescription medications you may use that may be dangerous and put you at high risk for overdose, falls, and other injuries.
- Have limited long-term benefits. Over time, opioids may not work as well to lower your pain or improve your level of function.

Common opioid side effects

Possible side effects include:

- Sleepiness or "slow thinking" that impairs judgment and decision making.
- Mental confusion, impaired focus or concentration, bad dreams, or hallucinations.
- Breathing difficulties or changes like slow or shallow breathing, especially with other preexisting conditions, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or sleep apnea.
- Constipation. Your doctor may prescribe laxatives. Exercising, eating a high-fiber diet, and drinking more water may also help temporarily.

- Sweating. You may be able to manage this by wearing light clothing and drinking more fluids.
- Itching, nausea, and vomiting. These symptoms may occur early in the treatment and may decrease over time.

Your doctor may be able to adjust your opioid dose or prescribe other medications to help you manage side effects. Side effects and risks are more likely at higher doses or with certain combinations of medications or complex regimens of opioids.

Opioid risks

Opioids can also cause:

- **Overdose and death.** There is a risk even when opioids are taken correctly as prescribed or in combination with other prescribed medications. The risks are even greater if you use street drugs or other illegal substances while taking opioids.
- **Respiratory depression (slow or shallow breathing).** This can be even more life-threatening for people with sleep apnea or other health conditions such as asthma or COPD.
- **Tolerance.** Your body gets used to opioids when they're taken daily. Over time, the opioid will be less effective at lowering your pain. You may start to feel you need a higher dose to get the same level of pain relief.
- **Worsening pain (hyperalgesia).** Some patients become more sensitive to pain (or feel the pain has spread to other areas of their body) while taking opioids. Higher doses don't reduce the pain.
- **Withdrawal symptoms (physical dependence).** Using opioids, even for a short while, can cause your body, nervous system, and brain to begin to rely on the medication. Suddenly stopping opioids, tapering (reducing) them too quickly, or taking a drug that blocks opioids (such as naloxone) can cause withdrawal symptoms.
- **Lower testosterone levels.** This affects sex drive, energy, and strength.
- **Injury-related deaths.**

- **Opioid use disorder.** Anyone taking opioids can develop a dependence on them. The risk goes up the longer you take opioids and with higher doses. **We monitor everyone who takes opioids for persistent (chronic) pain to identify possible signs of misuse or addiction.** This may include:

- Taking extra doses or saving up doses to take later.
- Requesting higher doses or pill counts.
- Asking for early prescription refills.
- Seeking out other doctors to prescribe opioids to you.
- Selling, trading, or sharing your medication.
- Borrowing opioid pills from other persons (family members, friends).

Opioids and your safety

If opioids are used to reduce pain, they'll be most effective when combined with other safer and more effective strategies. To reduce risks and promote your health and safety, your doctor may prescribe a trial of low-dose opioids for your pain. Your doctor and care team will also review your medications to make sure you're not taking dangerous combinations of prescribed medications.

You can discuss alternatives to opioids for managing pain with your health care team at any time.

Opioids may be tapered or stopped completely for patients whose risks of using opioids are greater than the benefits. Your doctor will develop a new treatment plan to help you manage pain and improve your function while also managing any withdrawal symptoms.

For your safety, your doctor and health care team will regularly monitor you to evaluate the effect of your opioid therapy on your pain and function to make sure the benefit to you of using these medications is greater than the risks.

Let your doctor know if you:

- Have opioid side effects that impact your daily activities.
- Take prescription or over-the-counter medications, including vitamins and other dietary supplements.
- Use cannabis or other substances to manage pain.

You'll need to sign the **Opioid Medication Agreement** that outlines your responsibilities while taking opioids.

This includes things such as:

- Using your opioid medications only as prescribed and directed. Do not break, chew, crush, dissolve, or inject your medicine. Do not take more medication than your doctor or health care team advises you to.
- Stopping your use of cannabis (marijuana) or any street or illegal drugs, including but not limited to heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and anything your doctor tells you shouldn't be used with opioids such as kratom.
- Not drinking alcohol.
- Avoiding driving or operating heavy machinery until your doctor and you are sure you can do so safely.
- Carrying naloxone, an anti-overdose medication, with you and/or having it available at your home as an extra precaution. Make sure your family and friends know how to use naloxone in case of an overdose emergency.

Self-care for persistent (chronic) pain

Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors influence our perception of pain. Studies have shown that when people with persistent pain learn about and practice a variety of self-care strategies, they can effectively manage pain. These skills include:

- **Using behavioral therapies** such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) to learn to react to pain in a way that helps you function better and reduce your pain.
- **Building mind-body awareness** by practicing mindfulness skills, including meditation and deep breathing exercises.
- **Exercising daily** and doing physical therapy-guided gentle movement such as tai chi.
- **Eating healthy** and managing weight.
- **Quitting smoking.**
- **Sleeping well.** This could mean addressing sleep problems such as sleep apnea and wearing a device at night, if prescribed for you, to help you get restorative sleep.
- **Seeking mental health counseling** for depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions that can trigger or exacerbate pain symptoms.
- **Attending pain management classes** and making a pain flare-up management plan.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.