

# Opioid safety

...for patients with acute pain

## What are opioids?

Opioids are strong medicines used to treat moderate to severe pain. They include oxycodone, morphine, hydromorphone, fentanyl, codeine, methadone and tramadol.

Patients who have pain from injury or after surgery may be prescribed opioids on a short-term basis. Opioids are also used to treat pain from cancer and other illnesses.

## Side-effects and risks

Common side-effects of opioids are:

- sleepiness
- nausea
- constipation
- itching
- sweating
- increased pain
- disrupted sleep or sleep apnea (pauses in breathing while asleep)
- changes in hormones, such as testosterone
- withdrawal symptoms after stopping, (tiredness, anxiety, runny nose, watery eyes, sweating, yawning and/or feeling sick)

Serious risks include opioid use disorder with longer-term use (see sidebar), and overdose or death from high doses or interaction with alcohol or other drugs.

### Naloxone saves lives!

Patients taking opioids should talk to their healthcare provider about naloxone, a fast-acting drug that can temporarily reverse opioid overdose in an emergency.

## ! Signs of opioid use disorder

If you are taking opioids for a longer period of time, tell your healthcare provider if you experience two or more of these signs. You may be developing an opioid use disorder and need your treatment reviewed.

- Taking larger amounts of the opioid or taking it for longer than intended.
- Finding it hard to stop or cut back use.
- Spending a lot of time obtaining the drug, using it, or recovering from its effects.
- Feeling a strong urge to use the drug (craving).
- Failing to meet work, home or school obligations.
- Having problems with family or friends because of taking the opioid.
- Cutting back on social, work or recreational activities that were important to you.
- Taking the opioid in situations that could be physically harmful.
- Continuing to use the opioid knowing it might be causing other health problems, or making them worse.
- Noticing the drug doesn't work as well as it used to, or needing to use more to get the same effect.

Naloxone kits are available without a prescription from many Alberta pharmacies and community health centres (map at <http://bit.ly/naloxone-AB>).

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## You are a partner in your own safe care.

If you take opioids while drinking alcohol or using other drugs – particularly sleep aids or drugs used to treat anxiety, insomnia or seizures – you will increase your risk of dying from drug interactions or overdose. For your safety, your healthcare provider may ask you about your drug and alcohol use. You may also be asked to provide a urine sample to check for any substances that could interfere with the medicine.

### **Be honest with your healthcare provider about your use of alcohol and drugs.**

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you are taking from any source. Also tell your healthcare provider about any family history of addiction, and if you have had a problem stopping drugs in the past – an opioid medicine may not be the best choice for you, or you may need special care to watch for signs of opioid use disorder.

### **Take your medicine only as prescribed, never more.**

To provide the most benefit with the least risk, your healthcare provider will prescribe the lowest effective dose for the appropriate length of time:

- For short-term pain such as from a broken bone or minor surgery, 3-7 days of pain medicine is normally enough.
- After major surgery, pain medicine may be needed for a few weeks. As the pain subsides, the medicine will be reduced, then stopped. Your healthcare provider will reassess you regularly and adjust your medicine as appropriate until you are better.
- If you stop taking pain medicine for more than 2-3 days, don't start again until you contact your healthcare provider – you may need a lower dose.

### **Be aware that the medicine may affect your ability to drive or do safety-sensitive work.**

Opioids can affect a person's ability to drive, operate machinery or perform other safety-sensitive tasks. Ask your healthcare provider if you should avoid these activities while taking the medicine.

### **Keep your medicine safe.**

Opioids are strong drugs that can kill if not used responsibly, and are classified as controlled narcotics in Canada and elsewhere. To protect your family members and your community:

- keep your medicine in a locked cabinet, away from heat and moisture,
- notify police within 24 hours if it is lost or stolen,
- never share or give away your medicine, and never take anyone else's medicine, and
- return any unused medicine to a licensed pharmacy.

## What to do if your pain doesn't go away.

If your pain continues or worsens, talk to your healthcare provider. You may have a pain that doesn't respond well to opioids, or there may be an undiagnosed reason for your pain requiring a new examination and treatment.

### **For more information, call 811 Health Link.**