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Taking Opioid Medicines

For your health and safety, it's important to take opioids exactly as directed. This helps ensure that the medicines work as they should. It also lowers the chances of side effects. And it lowers the risk of taking too high a dose (**overdose**). Each opioid medicine has its own instructions for use. Your healthcare provider will explain the ones you're prescribed and tell you how to take them. If you have questions or concerns, talk with your healthcare provider.

Using opioids safely

Opioids can work very well to relieve pain. But taking too much, taking them too long, or taking them in the wrong way can be harmful. To help reduce the risks to your health, follow these safety tips:

- Make sure you know if you are to take the medicine on a regular basis or only as needed.
- If your medicine is taken on a regular basis, take it on time and at the right dose. If you miss a dose, don't double up the next dose.
- Use a medicine log, app, or calendar to keep track of when you take your medicine. This helps you stay on schedule and not miss doses or take extra doses.
- When taking liquid doses, use a measuring spoon or dropper. This ensures you take the correct dose.
- Tell your healthcare provider right away if you have any side effects.
- Don't cut, crush, or change your medicine in any way.
- Don't take someone else's opioids. Don't share yours with other people.
- Don't drive while taking opioids.
- Don't use dangerous equipment or power tools while taking opioids.
- Check expiration dates regularly. Dispose of all expired medicines properly.

Beware of combining medicines

Some medicines can be dangerous when used with opioids. In some cases, combining medicines can cause death. Make sure to tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about **all** of the medicines you're taking. This includes over-the-counter medicines. It also includes vitamins, herbs, and other supplements. And it includes illegal or street drugs. Medicines that may be unsafe to use with opioids include:

- Over-the-counter pain relievers, such as acetaminophen
- Other prescription opioids
- Benzodiazepines such as clonazepam or alprazolam
- Muscle relaxants such as cyclobenzaprine or carisoprodol
- Hypnotics such as sleep aids like zolpidem

WARNING: Don't take opioids with alcohol or street drugs. This can cause death.

Symptoms of opioid overdose

Opioids act on the part of the brain that affects breathing. An overdose of opioids can slow breathing down too much. It can even stop your breathing. This can cause death. **Call 911 right away if you think you or someone else has had an overdose.**

Look for these 3 key symptoms:

- The dark circles in the middle of the eyes are very small (pinpoint pupils)
- Breathing is slow or stopped
- The person has passed out and does not respond (is not conscious)

Other symptoms to look for include:

- Limp body
- Pale face
- Cool, damp skin
- Purple or blue tint to lips and fingernails
- Vomiting

Storing opioids safely

Opioids need to be stored safely. This helps protect anyone else from accidentally taking the medicine. It also helps prevent the theft and misuse of the medicine. If possible, store the medicine in a locked container or cupboard that others cannot get to. Store the medicine in a cool dry place. Don't store it in a damp place, such as a bathroom. Always put the medicine back in its secure place after each use.

How to dispose opioids

Dispose of unused or expired opioids in a safe way. This is to prevent harm to other people. Don't save your medicine or give it to other people for any reason. Even a single dose of opioids can lead to death if it used by someone else. To dispose of your medicine safely:

- Find your community's medicine take-back program. You may need to drop the medicine off at a local police station or pharmacy.
- Ask your pharmacy about a mail-back program. You may be able to send the medicine through the mail. This is done using a special envelope.

If these options are not available to you, ask your healthcare provider for help.

The FDA also has guidelines for disposing of medicines. You may be able to flush them down the toilet. Or you may be able to put them in the trash. Check with your local water and waste management company to see what is allowed in your city or state. You can learn more here: www.fda.gov/drugs/resourcesforyou/consumers/buyingusingmedicinesafely/ensuringsafeuseofmedicine/safedisposalofmedicines/ucm186187.htm. Before using these options, check with your local water and waste management company to determine if this is allowed in your city or state.

Stopping opioid treatment

If you have been taking an opioid for more than a few weeks, your body gets used to having it. When you stop taking the medicine, you can have withdrawal symptoms. There are many kinds of withdrawal symptoms. They can range from mild to severe. They can include:

- Restlessness
- Anxiety
- Muscle aches
- Sweating
- Large (dilated) pupils
- Watery eyes
- Runny nose
- Trouble sleeping
- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal cramping
- Diarrhea
- Fast heartbeat

Don't stop opioid medicine without help from your healthcare provider. You will need a plan to safely stop taking it. This is to help manage withdrawal symptoms. In most cases, the amount of medicine you take will be cut down. You will take less and less over several weeks. If needed, you may need to take other medicines and treatments to help with this process. As the opioid medicine leaves your body, your body will adapt. Your withdrawal symptoms should then go away. How long this takes can vary for each person.

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