



Opioid misuse

What you need to know

Opioids are a type of drug used to reduce pain. For cancer patients and others living with chronic pain, they can be helpful. But it is dangerous for a person to become dependent on opioids, without ever meaning to use them to get high. And once a person becomes opioid-dependent, withdrawal symptoms make it hard to stop using the drugs.¹

What are opioids?

Opioids are usually prescribed by doctors for pain relief after surgery or an injury. They are also used to treat pain from cancer or osteoarthritis. Some common prescription opioids include hydrocodone, oxycodone, morphine and codeine. Fentanyl, usually prescribed for patients with advanced cancer, is an even stronger opioid. Side effects of these medications—even when they're taken as directed—can include:^{1,3}

- Being more sensitive to pain.
- Needing more medication for the same level of pain relief or developing a tolerance to the drug.
- Depression.
- Drowsiness.
- Feeling dizzy.
- Feeling sick to your stomach, or vomiting.
- Itching.
- Sweating.
- Lack of energy.
- Low sex drive.
- Symptoms of withdrawal when you stop taking the drug, or as you build up a tolerance to it.

How do I know if I am building tolerance to a pain medication?

When you build up a tolerance to an opioid, you can have withdrawal symptoms while you're still taking it. This can happen if you take more than your doctor prescribes, or if you take it more often than directed. You may also experience withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking the drug abruptly. Withdrawal symptoms can include:

or at school.