



Patient information: Opioid pain medicines (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What are opioid pain medicines? — Opioid pain medicines are a group of medicines that relieve pain. Some of these medicines are made from a plant called the poppy plant. Opioids are also sometimes called "narcotics." There are also many man-made (also called "synthetic") versions of opioid pain medicines.

Opioids come in lots of different forms, including:

- Pills and liquids that you swallow
- Lozenges and sprays that go in your mouth
- Patches that you wear on your skin
- Liquids that are given as a shot or into a thin tube that goes into a vein, called an IV

The table lists the names of some common opioids ([table 1](#)).

When are opioids used? — Opioids are used to treat severe pain caused by all sorts of medical problems and injuries. They are also used to manage pain after surgery. Some opioid medicines can be used to treat a bad cough. Plus, they can help control a symptom called "air hunger" in people who have serious breathing problems. Air hunger is when you feel like you can't get enough air.

Are all opioids the same? — Yes and no. All opioids work on the same chemical process in the body, but they do it in different ways. Some opioids need to be taken more often during the day than others to work for certain kinds of pain. And some are more likely than others to cause certain side effects. Plus, the effects of opioids are different depending on whether they come in a pill, a patch, a shot, or in some other way.

Are opioids safe for everyone? — Opioids are safe for most people who need them for severe pain. If you take these medicines, take **ONLY** the amount prescribed and only as often as prescribed. Do not chew, cut, or crush pills or capsules that release medicine slowly.

People who had a severe reaction to one opioid should not take the same opioid again. People with certain health conditions must use opioids with care or take smaller doses. That includes people who have breathing problems, or heart, kidney, or liver disease, and people who are older or weak.

People who have a history of drug abuse must also use opioids with care. They should avoid them if possible. But if they need the medicines to treat severe pain, they should seek the help of a pain specialist.

What side effects can opioids cause? — Opioids can cause some side effects that are just bothersome and some that are dangerous.

Call for an ambulance or go to the hospital if you (or someone close to you):

- Can't seem to wake up
- Become very confused
- Appear to be drowsy and breathing very slowly
- Pass out or have seizures
- Become unable to urinate

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any of these side effects and they bother you:

- Constipation – Your doctor or nurse might suggest you take medicines to prevent or treat constipation. It's also important to drink plenty of water.
- Nausea, vomiting, or itchiness – If you have any of these problems, your doctor might be able to switch you to a

different opioid.

Dry mouth

Feel dizzy, sleepy, or have trouble thinking clearly

Vision problems

Feel clumsy or fall down

What happens if I take more than the recommended dose? — Taking more than the recommended dose of an opioid or combining opioids with other medicines without a doctor's OK can cause serious problems. For example, it can make you pass out or stop breathing.

Anybody who takes too much of any medicine at once should call a doctor or the Poison Control Hotline (1-800-222-1222). If the person is not breathing or is not conscious, call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1).

Should I worry about addiction? — Taking opioids to manage pain or other symptoms does not lead to addiction in most people. But it can be a problem for people who have problems with drug or alcohol use.

To reduce the chances of addiction, you should:

Never take opioids that were not prescribed to you.

Take opioids only for as long as your doctor or nurse prescribes, and only at the dose he or she recommends.

If the problem for which the opioids were prescribed gets better, throw away any leftover opioids. Do not keep old opioids around the house.

Tell your doctor or nurse if the opioids seem to stop working.

What if I want to get pregnant? — If you take opioids and want to get pregnant, talk to your doctor or nurse before you start trying to get pregnant. Opioids taken during pregnancy can cause serious problems for the mother and the baby. There might be other ways to control your pain.

More on this topic

[Patient information: Chronic pain \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Managing pain when you have cancer \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs \(NSAIDs\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Opioid use disorder \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Prescription drug abuse \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Taking medicines when you're older \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Side effects from medicines \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Brand versus generic medicines \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Reducing the costs of medicines \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs \(NSAIDs\) \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Reducing the costs of medicines \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our [peer review process](#) is complete.

This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Apr 28, 2016.

The content on the UpToDate website is not intended nor recommended as a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your own physician or other qualified health care professional regarding any medical questions or conditions. The use of UpToDate content is governed by the [UpToDate Terms of Use](#). ©2016 UpToDate, Inc. All rights reserved.

Topic 85730 Version 7.0

GRAPHICS

Examples of common opioid pain medicines

Generic name	Sample brand names
Oxycodone	OxyContin®, Roxicodone®
Fentanyl	Duragesic®, Actiq®
Hydrocodone	Vicodin® (with acetaminophen) Vicoprofen® (with ibuprofen)
Methadone	Methadose®, Dolophine®
Morphine	MS Contin®
Codeine	Tylenol® with codeine no. 3 (with acetaminophen)

To find out more about the specific medicine you take, ask your doctor or nurse for the Lexicomp patient information handout for that medicine. Lexicomp drug information handouts are available through UpToDate.

Graphic 85592 Version 2.0