

Narcotic Drug Dependence

What is narcotic drug dependence?

Narcotics change your response to sensations. Narcotics also produce mood changes, unconsciousness, or deep sleep. The primary medical use of these drugs is to reduce pain. Narcotics are also available illegally and are frequently abused. Sometimes people become dependent on narcotics that are prescribed for pain and continue to use and abuse them when they are no longer needed to manage pain.

Examples of narcotics are:

- codeine
- heroin
- hydrocodone (Vicodin, Lortab)
- methadone (Dolophine)
- morphine (MS Contin)
- oxycodone (Percocet, OxyContin)

If you are dependent on a drug, you feel a need for the drug when it is stopped. If you crave the drug, or feel distressed without it, you are psychologically dependent. If you have bodily changes such as hot and cold flashes or tremors when the drug is stopped, you are physically dependent.

What is the cause?

Narcotics may make you dependent or addicted when you take them over time to reduce pain or for the pleasant, drowsy, floating feeling they give. Also, if you take these drugs repeatedly you may develop a tolerance to them. Tolerance means you need to take ever higher doses of the drug to produce the same effects.

The factors that increase your risk of dependence include:

- personality (such as low self-esteem, and being easily frustrated)
- environment (such as people, places, or objects you associate with drug use)
- psychological factors (such as anxiety, stress, depression, or loneliness)
- chronic pain
- whether it runs in your family
- how sensitive your body is to drugs
- the addictive qualities of narcotic drugs
- easy access to narcotic drugs

What are the symptoms?

Narcotic dependence can be diagnosed if 3 or more of the following occur:

- Have withdrawal symptoms when the substance is stopped.
- Need to use more and more of the drug in order to feel good.
- Drug is taken in larger amounts over a longer period than intended.
- Try and fail to control, cut back, or stop using narcotics.

- A lot of time spent in getting drugs or recovering from using them.
- Have problems with school, jobs, or social relationships because of substance use.
- Continue to use drugs even though aware of physical or psychological problems caused or made worse by use of the substance.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will take a complete history and examine you. A sample of your urine may be tested for drug use.

Your healthcare provider may test you for narcotic abuse by injecting a drug called naloxone hydrochloride into one of your muscles and recording your body's response. If you are using narcotics, your test will show some of the signs of a withdrawal reaction, including:

- faster pulse
- lower body temperature
- larger pupils
- sweating
- watery eyes
- high blood pressure
- yawning
- insomnia
- muscle aches
- runny nose
- diarrhea
- chest hair standing up
- craving for a narcotic

How is it treated?

People who are dependent on narcotics may not get help until they overdose. If you have taken an overdose and have trouble breathing, the healthcare provider will clear your airway and keep it open with a breathing tube. You may need treatment in the intensive care unit in the hospital. When you can breath normally, the healthcare provider will give you a shot of naloxone hydrochloride and watch you for 48 hours. Naloxone hydrochloride blocks the effects of a narcotic overdose. Your healthcare provider or counselor will evaluate you and recommend a treatment plan.

Your healthcare provider or counselor will help you to admit that you have a drug problem. He or she will also help you identify the stresses in your life and find ways to better handle stress and anxiety.

Your healthcare provider may recommend community self-help groups, as well as individual counseling for you. Your treatment program will emphasize staying away from all narcotic drugs and other drugs of abuse for the rest of your life. Treatment with methadone may also be part of the program.

Parents, family, and friends may be involved in your treatment. You may also get information about nutrition, exercise, relaxation techniques, and stress management.

How long will the effects last?

Withdrawal may last from a couple of days to 2 weeks. Recovering from narcotic dependence is a long-term process. Breaking the habit of dependence is difficult. The first step is to admit that you have a drug problem.

How can I take care of myself?

- **Get support.** Talk with family and friends. Consider joining a self-help group such as Narcotics Anonymous.
- **Learn to manage stress.** Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax, for example take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- **Take care of your physical health.** Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Don't use alcohol or drugs. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- **Avoid situations where people are likely to use alcohol or drugs.**
- **Check your medicines.** To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take.
- **Contact your healthcare provider or therapist** if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

How can I help prevent narcotic drug dependence?

- Do not borrow other people's medicines.
- Use prescription drugs exactly as your healthcare provider directs.
- Try to take the lowest dose possible of narcotics prescribed for pain.

For more information, contact:

NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS
PO Box 9999
Van Nuys, California 91409 USA
(818) 773-9999
Web site: <http://www.na.org/>

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