

Are you thinking about taking opioids (painkillers) for your pain?

Review this information and talk to your doctor to see if painkillers are right for you. Opioids can be one part of a safe and overall pain plan, but they require care. If you and your doctor decide that they are right for you, then both of you will set goals to look at your pain, side effects and daily function.

Opioids

They are commonly called *analgesics* or *painkillers* that help with moderate to severe pain.

Names of some painkillers include: Tylenol 3[®], Percocet[®], OxyNEO[®], Tramacet[®], and Metadol[®].

Because they are a controlled substance, doctors are required to carefully monitor patients' use.

Painkillers Reduce Pain by

- Decreasing reaction to pain, and increasing ability to put up with pain.
- Improving how you function and carry out your daily activities.

Side Effects

- Can be decreased by starting at a low dose and increasing it slowly under your doctor's direction.
- Include: nausea, vomiting, constipation, drowsiness, dizziness, dry-skin or itching, and dry-mouth.
- Can become manageable as your body adjusts. For example, to minimize constipation, increase fiber intake (by eating more fruit, vegetables, whole grains), water and exercise.

Concerns about Dependency

- Being dependent on a painkiller means that your body is used to how the medicine affects the pain.
- Being addicted to a painkiller means that you are abusing or misusing the medicine for reasons other than pain relief.
- Your doctor will ask you questions and talk about any concerns you may have about dependency.
- Over time, your body may get used to the dose of the painkiller you are taking.



Avoiding Risks to Yourself

- Take the medication exactly as your doctor instructed.
- Only one doctor should be prescribing your painkillers to make sure you are meeting the goals that you both set.
- You should fill your prescriptions at the same pharmacy.
- Urine and blood screening may be used to identify potential problems.

Avoiding Risks to Others

- Do not share your painkillers with others—it is against the law and could seriously harm or kill them.
- The doctor’s prescription should be taken safely to a pharmacy as soon as possible.
- Keep your painkillers securely stored at home in a locked box or cabinet to prevent accidental poisoning, or being taken by others for misuse.
- Return unused medications to the original pharmacy.

Avoiding Withdrawal Symptoms

- Symptoms will occur if you stop using your painkillers.
- These can be uncomfortable and include nausea, diarrhea, chills, and flu-like symptoms.
- Your body has become used to the medication so the dose must be decreased slowly under your doctor’s direction before being stopped.

Avoiding Overdose

- Overdose means your ability to think clearly is impaired and your breathing could slow down or stop. This may cause brain damage, coma and death.
- Painkillers can be safe over long periods of time. **But** they can be dangerous when you start or increase a dose.
- **Avoid mixing painkillers with alcohol or other drugs** since this increases the risk of overdose.
- If you or your family members notice: slurred or drawling speech, becoming upset or crying easily, poor balance, or “nodding off” during conversation or activity contact your doctor.
- If you or your family members notice: extreme sleepiness or difficulty to rouse **call 911**.

Travel

- Keep your painkillers in the original container from the pharmacy.
- If you fly, keep your painkillers with you in your carry-on luggage.
- It is helpful to bring a letter from your doctor explaining your need for painkillers, especially if you are going outside of your province or territory.

***Opioids can be one part of a safe and overall pain plan but they require care.
Take this document to your next doctor’s visit to help guide the conversation.***

This document was prepared by the Michael G. DeGroot National Pain Centre, September 2012.