

OPIOID USE IN OLDER ADULTS

A Guide for Patients



Opioids are a class of medications that relieve pain. This includes some illegal drugs as well as prescribed drugs such as synthetic opioids oxycodone (OxyContin), hydrocodone (Norco), and others.

Understanding Chronic Pain

- Chronic pain is a complex syndrome that may benefit from several treatment approaches, both with and without medications.
- Medications alone may not be enough to control pain.
- Exercise, physical therapy, and other healthy lifestyle changes can help to reduce pain symptoms.
- With the use of opioids, your pain will not be completely resolved, but your functioning may improve. Pain control goals should focus on this functioning.

If possible, see one doctor for all of your opioid prescriptions, or tell each doctor you see about all opioid use. It is also a good idea to fill your prescriptions at only one pharmacy.

Higher doses of opioids are not associated with improved pain relief. However, higher doses are likely to increase the risk of side effects.

Tell your doctor about all other medications you take, as some may interact with opioids. Using alcohol with opioids can also be dangerous.

Due to how our bodies process medications with age, older patients are at an increased risk for certain side effects:

- Impaired balance
- Increased fracture risk
- Confusion
- Sleepiness/sedation
- Dizziness
- Urinary retention
- Erectile dysfunction
- Nausea and vomiting
- Slower breathing rate
- Accidents and injury

Opioids do have a proper place in the treatment of pain. Especially in older patients, side effects must be closely monitored by patients, caregivers, and providers.



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A Guide for Caregivers

Caregivers of older adults on opioids can advocate for patients and monitor for any adverse effects. Understanding signs of adverse effects and appropriate emergency measures can save lives.

Respiratory Depression

Older adults are at a greater risk of adverse effects due to the way our aging bodies process medications. The most dangerous problem to look out for is respiratory depression. When opioids levels are too high, or when they interact with another medication or alcohol, the risk for respiratory depression is greatest. Monitor for increased sedation and a decreased rate of breathing. Consider requesting a naloxone prescription for the emergency treatment of an overdose.

Monitoring Medication Usage

In older adults with any memory loss or cognitive impairment, it can be helpful to use pill box organizers. These older adults are at a higher risk of omitting or taking extra medications, especially if they are prescribed on an as-needed basis. Caregivers can assist patients by filling pill boxes and writing down when medicines were taken. Documentation can help prevent unintentional overdoses and promote patient safety.

Monitor patients for alcohol usage.

Older patients can have higher alcohol levels than younger patients, and the interaction with opioids can be fatal.

Store all medications in a safe place out of the reach of children, pets, and individuals who might want the medications.

Dispose of leftover medications at a medication takeback location or mix with coffee grounds in a sealed container and put in the trash. Ask your local law enforcement where they have a takeback location.

Tylenol Usage Tylenol, or acetaminophen, is an effective non-opioid option for treating pain. However, it is important to remember that many formulations of opioids contain Tylenol in them, such as Norco, Vicodin, and Percocet. Patients should not consume more than 3000 mg per day of Tylenol, so it is necessary to calculate the total from each medication. Communicate with the provider if the patient uses Tylenol regularly.

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