

Side Effects and Risks of Opioid Use for Chronic Pain

Patient Education

Opioids are pain relief medications. When taken in low doses, they are safe and effective. Like any medication, they have risks and side effects. They can even be deadly if not taken as directed.

Here are important things to know about taking opioids:

- **Take your medication exactly as prescribed. If you have questions, call your doctor or pharmacy.**
- **Tell your doctor and pharmacist all the prescription and over-the-counter medicines you take.**
- **Do NOT drink alcohol, use illegal drugs, or take sleep aids or muscle relaxants with opioids unless approved by your doctor.**
- **Never take medications that are not prescribed to you.**
- **If an overdose happens, call 911 immediately.**

Sedation

Opioids can make you very tired and sleepy. This raises your risk of falls and accidents that can cause severe injury.

You should avoid driving, using heavy machinery, and making important decisions until you know how opioids affect you.

Accidental Overdose or Death

Patients taking opioids are at risk of accidental overdose or death. It is very dangerous to combine opioids with other medicines or drugs that cause sleepiness, such as the following:

- Alcohol
- Certain anti-anxiety and seizure medications
- Muscle relaxants
- Sleep aids

Tell your doctor all the medicines you take. Never drink alcohol or use illegal drugs with opioids. Remember, if an overdose happens, call 911.

Constipation

Constipation means infrequent, hard bowel movements. It is one of the most common side effects of opioid use. Using laxatives or stool softeners is often the best way to manage it.

Other methods can relieve constipation if laxatives and stool softeners don't help. These include suppositories, enemas, rectal irrigation, and manual evacuation.

Low Sex Hormones

Hormones such as testosterone and estrogen tend to be lower in patients taking opioids. In men, this can cause less sex drive or difficulty getting an erection. In women, menstrual cycles may stop during long-term use of oral or skin patch opioids.

Dependence

If opioids are taken every day, you may become physically dependent. This means your body begins to rely on these medications. If they are suddenly stopped, the body will go through withdrawal. This is not dangerous, but it is very uncomfortable. It causes you to feel like you have the flu.

Dependence is not something a patient can control. It does not mean a patient is addicted to opioids. It is simply the body's natural response to opioids. It is very important to take the dose prescribed by your doctor.

Tolerance

Many patients taking opioids for chronic pain find they have to continually increase their dose to get the same pain relief. Over time, opioid receptors in the body become less sensitive to the drug. This is called tolerance.

Taking higher doses of opioids leads to a greater risk of side effects. In addition, at some point even higher doses will not relieve pain. If this happens, talk with your doctor about other ways to manage pain.

Sensitivity from Opioid Pain Medicines

Long-term use of opioids may actually make pain worse. This is called opioid-induced hyperalgesia. It happens when opioid use causes the body to be extra sensitive to usually non-painful things. Taking more opioids will make pain worse or cause pain in other areas of the body.

Central Sleep Apnea

Central sleep apnea can develop with opioid use. This means there are short periods of time that you stop breathing during sleep. The risk of central sleep apnea goes up with higher doses of opioids. The risk also goes up when opioids are used with alcohol, illegal drugs, and other medicines that cause sleepiness.

Central sleep apnea also means you may not get enough sleep, which leaves you feeling tired during the day. Your sleep patterns may change as a result.

Lung and Heart Problems

Opioid use causes sedation and lessens the brain's ability to control breathing, which can slow your breathing. Over time, this can damage the heart and lungs because you aren't getting enough air. This risk goes up with higher doses of opioids. The risk also goes up when opioids are used with alcohol, illegal drugs, sleep aids, and other medicines that cause sleepiness.

If too much opioid medication is taken, you can stop breathing. **If this happens, you or a caregiver should call 911 immediately.**

Some medications have delayed side effects. This means the side effect doesn't appear until hours or days after taking the medication. One example is methadone, which can cause trouble breathing and irregular heart rhythms that can be fatal.

Call your doctor right away if you develop any symptoms that affect your breathing and heart rate.

Dry Mouth

Opioid use can lower the amount of saliva in your mouth (called dry mouth). Saliva flushes away bacteria in your mouth that cause tooth decay.

Short-acting opioids cause only short periods of dry mouth. With long-acting opioids, however, dry mouth can last much longer.

Good dental hygiene can help. Visit your dentist regularly to check for tooth decay or other problems.

Supportive Oncology and Survivorship (SOS) Service

The SOS Service at Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI) provides support for cancer patients, including help with pain management and other symptoms or concerns.

Specialists from several HCI clinics and programs are part of the SOS Service:

- Supportive Oncology Clinic
- Linda B. and Robert B. Wiggins Wellness-Survivorship Center
- Patient and Family Support (social workers)
- Spiritual Care Services (chaplain)

Contact the SOS Service with questions or concerns by calling 801-213-4246, Monday - Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.