

Side Effects of Opioid Pain Medicines

Opioids are a class of very strong pain medicine. This sheet explains the risks of using opioids to treat pain for long periods of time. Ask your doctor if you have questions after reading this sheet.

Important Points

- Opioids provide good pain relief.
 - In low doses, they are usually safe.
 - In high doses, these drugs have dangerous side effects.
- High doses of opioids are NOT good for chronic non-cancer pain.
- Increasing a dose of opioids does not always help pain, BUT it does increase side effects.
- When misused, pain medicines are as dangerous as illegal drugs.

Accidental Overdose and Death

- Prescription medicines are only safe if taken as directed.
- Taking too much opioid medicine can result in overdose and death.
- Combining opioids with alcohol, sleep aids or muscle relaxers increases the risk of overdose and death.
- Tell your doctor about all the medicines you take so you don't have an unwanted interaction.
- Do not drink alcohol or use illegal drugs while taking opioid medicine.

Breathing and Heart Problems

- Opioids cause breathing to be slower and more shallow than normal.
- Taking too much opioid medicine can stop breathing all together and can cause death.
- Mixing opioids with alcohol or other drugs increases the risk of breathing problems.
- In some patients, opioids can cause irregular heart rhythms.
- Irregular heart rhythms are very serious and can be life-threatening.

Drowsiness

- Opioid medicines cause drowsiness. This increases the risk of falls, accidents and injury.
- Do not drive, operate heavy machinery or make serious health or financial decisions until you know how the medicine affects you.

Physical Dependence

- Prolonged or overuse of drugs prescribed for pain or sedation may lead to addiction or dependence.
- Physical dependence leads to drug withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking the drug.
- Psychological dependence may make you feel a strong craving for the drug.
- You may be unable to stop using the drug even though you want to stop.
- These problems can occur even when the medicine is taken at the prescribed dose.

Tolerance

- Over time, many people must increase their dose of opioid pain medicine to get the same amount of relief. This is called tolerance.
- Tolerance is common with long-term use of opioid pain medicine as pain receptors become less sensitive to the medicine over time. At some point, increasing the dose of medicine will not improve pain relief at all.
- Increased doses lead to increased risk of side effects.

Sleep Disorders

- Sleep apnea is a condition where there are long pauses between breaths when you sleep. This leads to low oxygen levels which can damage your heart and lungs.
- Using opioid medicine increases the risk of sleep apnea.
- In some patients, opioids disrupt sleep patterns and contribute to poor sleep.

Constipation and Bowel Dysfunction

- Opioid medicines are known to cause constipation. Even with constipation treatment strategies, bowel issues are a major challenge.
- Traditional laxatives may not be enough to treat constipation. Other medicines may be necessary. If medicine taken by mouth is not effective, rectal interventions may be needed. Rectal interventions include:
 - Suppositories
 - Enemas
 - Rectal irrigation
 - Manual evacuation

Low Sex Hormones

- Opioid medicines lower hormone levels.
 - In men, opioid use may increase erectile dysfunction and decrease sex drive.
 - In women, opioid use may stop your period. This is especially true for opioids delivered by a patch.

Opioid Induced Hyperalgesia

- Opioid induced hyperalgesia is a condition where opioid pain medicines create more pain rather than pain relief. In this case, increasing doses of pain medicine can create more pain.

Increase Risk of Fracture

- Opioids affect bone health. Patients who take opioids for a long time can develop osteoporosis (weak bones). This leads to an increased risk of bone fractures.

Dry Mouth and Tooth Decay

- Opioids can make your mouth dry.
- Chronic dry mouth leads to acid erosion of tooth enamel.
- It is very important to take good care of your teeth while taking opioids.
- Visit your dentist to monitor the health of your teeth.

If you have any questions or concerns, call your healthcare team at 732-235-2465.

If you are in need of immediate assistance, please call 732-235-2465 and select the option that best meets your needs.