

# Opioid Medication Overview



## What Is an Opioid?

Opioids are a class of drugs that include pain relievers, such as hydrocodone, oxycodone, and morphine. This class also includes the illegal drug heroin and the synthetic opioid fentanyl. Prescription opioids are for pain treatment for certain health conditions or after surgery or a serious injury. Although opioids can be an important part of a treatment plan, there are risks associated with them.

Opioid drugs are addictive. As many as one in four people who have long-term opioid prescriptions struggle with addiction. Addiction can cause symptoms of uncontrollable cravings, inability to control drug use, compulsive drug use, inability to meet obligations of daily life, and use despite doing harm to oneself or others. If you are concerned about your medication use, please contact your doctor. For additional help or information, call the national SAMHSA helpline toll-free at (800) 662-4357 or TTY (800) 487-4889, or visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) website at [FindTreatment.samhsa.gov](http://FindTreatment.samhsa.gov).

## The "Opioid Crisis"

Because opioids were very effective for treating pain, they have been widely prescribed for many years. But over time, they were also found to be highly addictive.

It's estimated that more than 100 people per day in the United States die from opioid overdose. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the total cost of prescription opioid misuse and abuse is more than \$78 billion a year. This amount includes the costs of healthcare, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and the criminal justice system. According to the CDC:

- Roughly 21 to 29 percent of patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them.
- Between 8 and 12 percent develop an opioid use disorder.
- An estimated 4 to 6 percent who misuse prescription opioids transition to heroin.
- About 75 percent of new heroin users report a history of abusing opioids.
- Opioid overdoses increased 30 percent from July 2016 through September 2017 in 45 states.

### Idaho

Direct: (208) 333-1596  
Toll-free: (800) 688-5008

### Montana

Direct: (406) 442-6589  
Toll-free: (877) 590-1596

### Oregon

Direct: (541) 684-5582  
Toll-free: (888) 977-9299

### TTY

Toll-free: (800) 735-2900

### En Español

Direct: (541) 684-5456  
Toll-free: (866) 281-1464

### Email

[cs@pacificsource.com](mailto:cs@pacificsource.com)

### PacificSource.com



## Avoiding Accidental Overdose

**Take only the amount prescribed.** Opioids affect the part of the brain that regulates breathing, so high doses can cause slow breathing and even death. If you don't think your medication is working effectively, contact your doctor.

**Avoid alcohol or sedatives while taking prescription opioids.** It is especially dangerous to combine opioids with alcohol or sedatives, like benzodiazepines (e.g., lorazepam/Ativan, alprazolam/Xanax, diazepam/Valium). Alcohol and sedatives are often present in fatal drug overdoses. Unless advised by your doctor, avoid:

- Benzodiazepines (e.g., lorazepam/Ativan, alprazolam/Xanax, diazepam/Valium)
- Muscle relaxants (Flexeril, Soma, Zanaflex)
- Sleep aids (Ambien, Lunesta)
- Other prescription opioids

**Know the signs of opioid overdose.** Even if you aren't sure, treat the situation like an overdose—you could save a life. **Call 911** or get medical care immediately. Don't leave the person alone. Signs may include any of the following:

- Small, constricted "pinpoint pupils"
- Falling asleep or loss of consciousness
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Limp body
- Pale, blue, or cold skin

## Side Effects

Let your doctor know if you experience opioid side effects, such as:

- Tolerance (needing to take more medication for the same pain relief)
- Physical dependence (symptoms of withdrawal when a medication is stopped)
- Increased sensitivity to pain
- Constipation
- Sleepiness, dizziness, and confusion
- Nausea, vomiting, and dry mouth

## Alternatives for Pain Relief

Talk with your doctor about all your options for pain relief. In addition to alternative medications, a nondrug treatment or therapy may be effective for reducing your pain. Nondrug options may include:

- Acupuncture
- Massage therapy
- Chiropractic manipulation
- Exercise or physical therapy
- Relaxation therapy
- Treatment for depression

## Safe Storage and Disposal

Be sure to store your medication, especially opioids, in a safe place and out of reach of others. Dispose of any unused medication safely through a disposal location. Don't put medications in the trash or flush them down the toilet. If you're not sure where to take leftover medication, ask your pharmacy or use the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) disposal location online search tool at [apps.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/pubdispsearch](https://apps.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/pubdispsearch). More locations may be available on National Prescription Drug Take Back Day.

## Free, Confidential Help

Get free and confidential information in English and Spanish 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

## Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA)

**Toll-free helpline:** (800) 662-4357  
or TTY (800) 487-4889

**Website:** [FindTreatment.samhsa.gov](https://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov)

## Sources:

National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute on Drug Abuse, [drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids](https://drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [cdc.gov/drugoverdose](https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose).