

UW Medicine | **Benefits and Risks of Treatment with Opioids**

This handout explains the benefits and risks of using opioid pain medicines.

What are opioids?

Opioids are medicines that are used for pain control. They are similar to morphine. Laws control how these medicines are used.

You and your health care team can safely manage your opioid treatment. Please talk with your provider if you have any questions after reading this handout.

What are the benefits of opioids?

- You may have less pain.
- You may be able to be more active physically.
- Your emotional health may improve.



Like many medicines, opioids have both benefits and risks.

What are the possible side effects and risks of opioids?

The most dangerous side effect of opioids is that they may cause your breathing to slow down. This slowing of your breathing increases the risk that your breathing and heart could stop.

Special Warning: It is very dangerous to drink alcohol or use sleeping pills, illegal drugs (cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines) or pain medicines that your provider did not prescribe while you are taking your prescribed pain medicine. If you do, your breathing and heart could stop.

Other side effects are:

- The medicine may make you very sleepy.
- You may have nausea and vomiting.

- You may become constipated.
- You may feel itchy.
- You may have an allergic reaction that causes shortness of breath, wheezing, and a rash.
- Your brain will become dependent on the pain medicine. This means you will have symptoms of withdrawal if you suddenly stop taking it. Some symptoms of withdrawal are nausea, vomiting, and sweating. These are not life-threatening.
- The medicine may not work as well over time.
- You may become addicted to the medicine, or it may be hard to control how often you take it or how much you take.
- You may have more pain.
- If you have depression, it may get worse.
- You may gain weight.
- You may lose sexual desire and have trouble getting aroused.
- You may become infertile while you are taking opioids.
- Your immune system will become weaker and less able to fight infection. You may not be able to fight off colds or other viruses well. Wounds might take a long time to heal.
- You may have trouble thinking.
- Your judgment may be impaired. This can cause you to make poor decisions.
- It may be unsafe to drive or use machinery.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns.

Clinic Name and Phone Number:
