

Reducing Your Opioid Use

Tapering safely

This handout explains why it is important to reduce opioid use. It describes ways to safely reduce your dose of these medicines.

What are opioids?

Opioids are strong prescription pain medicines. They are often used to treat severe pain after surgery and to provide pain relief at the end of life. Opioids should not be used for long-term treatment for most other types of pain.

Why should I reduce or stop opioids?

Opioids provide only some pain relief. Over time, they can also cause changes in your brain and nervous system. These changes can mean:

- The medicine may stop working.
- You may have more pain than before.
- Your brain may become dependent on pain medicine. If this happens, you will have withdrawal symptoms if you suddenly stop taking it. (See “Withdrawal Symptoms” on page 2.)
- If you have depression, it may get worse.
- Your judgment may be affected. This can cause you to make poor decisions.
- You may gain weight.
- You may fall.
- You may lose sexual desire and have trouble getting aroused.



Be sure to talk with the provider who prescribed your opioids about any questions or concerns you have.

- Your immune system will become weaker. This makes it harder for your body to fight infections, colds, or other viruses. Wounds might take a long time to heal.
- If you drive, you may get into a car accident.
- You might accidentally overdose and die.

How can I reduce my opioid dose?

The goal is to reduce your opioid dose slowly. This is called *tapering* or *weaning*.

The provider who prescribed your opioid medicine will work with you. Together, you will create a plan to help you taper your dose. There is no one best plan that works for everyone. There is no rush, as long as you keep reducing your dose.

To taper your opioid medicine, you can:

- Take a smaller dose each time; or
- Increase the time between doses

It works best to reduce the dose at a time of the day when your pain is best controlled. For example, if your pain is less in the evening, reduce your dose at that time of day or take it later than usual.

If you are taking long-acting or extended-release opioids, it may be easier to taper these before tapering short-acting opioids.

Withdrawal Symptoms

If you suddenly stop taking your opioid or reduce your dose too quickly, you could have withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms are not life-threatening, but they are uncomfortable. They include:

- Diarrhea
- Muscle aches
- Trouble sleeping
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sweating
- Anxiety
- Feeling sad

Managing Cravings

It is normal to have some feelings of *craving* (a longing) to keep taking pain medicine. **To help yourself get through a craving:**

- Tell yourself that you are capable of coping with a craving, no matter how strong it is.
- Remember that cravings always pass in time.
- Buy yourself time by saying you'll put off taking a dose for a few hours.
- Do something to distract yourself.
- Remember the troubles caused by using the pain medicine.
- Feel your feet firmly on the ground and take a deep breath.
- Imagine the cravings as a wave that you are surfing to safety. Rather than fighting against the wave, you can ride it to shore without getting engulfed in it. "Ride out" the craving and it will eventually leave you.

Be sure to talk with the provider who prescribed your opioids about any questions or concerns you have. If you feel that you might be addicted, tell this provider. Addiction can be treated and overcome.

What if I still have pain?

Your pain control plan includes taking medicines **and** using non-drug methods. Pain medicines do not remove all pain, so please also use non-drug methods such as heat, cold, or relaxation to help control your pain.

How can I learn more?

- Watch the online video "Understanding Pain: Brainman stops his opioids": www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI1myFQPdCE
- Read the book *Less Pain, Fewer Pills: Avoid the Dangers of Prescription Opioids and Gain Control over Chronic Pain*, by Beth Darnall, PhD

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your nurse if you have questions or concerns. Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., call your clinic:

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call the Community Care Line nurse: 206.744.2500.