

Pain Management and Safe Use of Opioids after Surgery

Why is it important to control pain after surgery?

You can expect to feel pain after having surgery and there are effective medications to keep post-surgical pain under control.-This is important because pain affects many systems in the body and may prolong the recovery process.

Pain can:

- Decrease the healing process of incisions
- Increase blood pressure
- Decrease the body's ability to fight off infection

How will I manage my pain and comfort at home?

Your goal at home is to control your pain enough so you can do the things you need to do to heal. It is important to know that pain is normal after surgery and everyone feels pain differently. You may be given prescriptions for pain medication (opioids) to take at home. These may or may not be the same pain medications you took in the hospital.

We are careful about using opioid pain medication after surgery because they have been shown to be addictive, may cause you harm, and even cause overdose if used incorrectly or abused.

Michigan law now limits prescribing of pain medication (opioids) for treatment of surgical pain to 7 days. We will work closely with you to create a plan for managing your pain after surgery.

Below are a few tips to help you relieve your pain and discomfort:

- Remember to take your pain medication before activity and at bedtime. Your health care provider may advise you to take your pain medication at regular intervals (such as every 4 to 6 hours) for a short period of time.
- Be sure to get enough rest. If you are having trouble sleeping, talk to your health care provider.
- Use pillows to support you when you sleep and when you do your coughing and deep breathing exercises.
- Ask your health care provider if it is okay to use over the counter acetaminophen (Tylenol[®]) or ibuprofen (Motrin[®], Advil[®]).
- Before using an opioid, try using (Tylenol[®]) or ibuprofen (Motrin[®], Advil[®]) if your health care provider has told you it is okay to use.
- Try using alternative methods: heating pads or cold therapy, guided imagery, listening to soft music, changing your position in bed, or massage.

What is the risk of becoming addicted to pain medications?

Talk to your health care provider or nurse about your fears.

This risk is higher in patients who:

- Use opioids for a longer period of time
- Smoke tobacco
- Use or have a history of using alcohol and/or recreational drugs
- Have a history of mental illness

Over time, people taking opioid pain medicines develop tolerance to it. This means that the same dose (amount) of medicine will be less effective to help with pain, even if the side effects, (such as constipation), persist. This tolerance leads to **dependence**, which means that the body feels a need for the medicine. It could possibly lead to **addiction**, which is when this need interferes with daily life. Dependence can develop when the medicine is used as prescribed. Addiction occurs when the medicine is abused.

What are the guidelines to keep me and my family safe?

1. Be aware of potential side effects, when to call your health care provider and when to call 911

Use of opioids may affect your ability to drive, function at work and make important decisions. You are also at a higher risk of falling. Talk with your healthcare provider about activities you need to avoid while taking opioids.

Prior to taking first dose of medications, read patient counseling information which comes with your prescription provided by the manufacturer. Contact your health care provider if you have any further questions about this.

Common side effects of opioids are constipation, nausea and vomiting, itching or rash. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any of these symptoms. To prevent constipation, your healthcare provider will also give you medications to help promote bowel movements.

Never take an opioid pain medication that is not prescribed to you

Everyone responds differently to pain medications. What is safe for one person may not be safe for another. Government statistics show that many people share their medications and that sharing opioids leads to great harm.

2. Never adjust your own doses

Even after the effects of the opioid seem to have worn off, the medication may still be depressing your breathing so taking more than your health care provider instructed may be dangerous. Do not expect opioid medications to remove all pain. If you are still in pain after taking the opioid as your health care provider prescribed, talk to them about safer ways to control the pain.

3. **Never mix opioids with alcohol**

This combination can be dangerous. This is because alcohol increases the harmful effects of opioid pain medication. Many overdose deaths from opioids also involved at least one other drug or alcohol.

4. **Keep your medications locked in a safe place**

Opioid pain prescriptions may be deadly if children, teenagers or other family members, take them by accident. Make sure you keep these medications locked and away from the reach of children, in a dry and cool place. Stolen prescription pain medications that are sold on the street can kill.

5. **Dispose of any unused medications**

Leftover pain medications make tempting targets for theft. They can also be dangerous if children or pets find them. Many communities offer places for you to drop off unused medications.

- To find a medication disposal site in Michigan visit: <http://michigan-open.org/takebackmap/>. Type in your location under the map to find locations to dispose of leftover medication.
- To find locations in all US states visit AwareRxE at: <https://nabp.pharmacy/initiatives/awarxe/drug-disposal-locator/>

If a take-back program is not available in your area visit <http://michmed.org/MmA6N> to learn how to properly dispose of medications.

How can I keep track of my pain management?

In order to improve your pain as much as possible your health care provider needs to know the exact times you are taking your medications and how much pain you are having. To record your pain level use a number between zero (0)

and ten (10) where zero means you don't have any pain at all and "ten" means you have so much pain, you cannot imagine it being any worse. Have this table ready during your post-operative phone call and bring it with you to your return visit at your health care provider's office.

To access the handouts referenced above visit:

www.med.umich.edu/careguides

Type a Keyword in the search-box and hit the Search button.

Who do I call if I have any questions or problems?

Please call (734) 936-8470 and ask to speak with the anesthesia resident on call.

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