

# Taking Opioids Safely

---

Your healthcare provider gave you an opioid pain medication to relieve your pain. Opioids are strong medications that provide good pain relief but may cause harm. Opioids slow down breathing and can lead to overdose and death if not used properly.

Follow these guidelines to keep yourself and your family safe:

**1. 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. The body must develop a tolerance to the effects on breathing before the dose can be increased. Only a healthcare provider knows whether it is safe to increase the dose. Do not expect opioid medications to remove all pain. If you are still in pain after taking the opioid as your doctor prescribed, talk to your healthcare provider about safer ways to control the pain. Never take opioid medications to relieve stress or because you feel depressed or anxious. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to handle these problems separate from your pain medications.

**3. Be aware of potential Side Effects**

You may have constipation, nausea and vomiting, itching or a rash while on opioids. 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. Use of opioids may affect

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

**4. Never mix opioids with alcohol**

This combination can be dangerous. This is because alcohol increases the harmful effects of opioid pain medication. Most overdose deaths from opioids also involved at least one other drug or alcohol. Alcohol contributes to many prescription-drug deaths.

**5. Never mix opioids with sleep aids or anti-anxiety medications**

This is another dangerous combination. Sleep aids and anti-anxiety medications are often found together with opioids in the blood of people who died from prescription-drug overdose. Combining pain medications with sleep aids or anti-anxiety medications can increase the toxic effects of the pain medication. Remember, opioid pain medications can slow down, and even stop breathing during sleep. If you have anxiety, pain at night or trouble sleeping, speak to your healthcare provider about safer ways to manage these problems.

**6. Always tell your healthcare provider about all medications and supplements you are taking from any source**

Drug interactions may be dangerous. Certain medications and supplements can react with opioids and either increase or reduce the effect the medication in your body. Do not drink any alcohol (beer, wine or hard liquor) or take other medicines (including over-the-counter products, herbs, supplements or other drugs) while taking opioid medicines. This includes medications, herbs or supplements that were prescribed by another healthcare provider and those you bought over-the-counter. You can take other medications **only if** the healthcare provider who prescribed your opioid medications directed you to do so.

## **7. Keep track of when you take all medications**

Use a log to track your use of all prescribed medications, over-the-counter drugs and natural supplements. To do this, write down the names of all prescriptions you need to take longer than two weeks. Next to the name note the date the medication was added or changed, the dosage, how often to take it, the reason for taking it and the doctor who prescribed it). Keep this record in a safe place, and show it to your pharmacist whenever a medication is added or changed. You can use the Log in this link to track down your medications.

[http://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/18/Speakup\\_Card\\_Meds\\_Ex.pdf](http://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/18/Speakup_Card_Meds_Ex.pdf)

## **8. Potential risk for Addiction**

Use of opioids for acute pain has a low risk of addiction. However, some patients are at risk for physical dependency, tolerance and addiction following the use of opioids. This risk is higher in patients that are on opioids for a longer period of time, or when patients are using more than one opioid, in addition to alcohol and/or recreational drugs.

## **9. 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 away from the reach of children and do not share them with other family members. Stolen prescription pain medications that are sold on the street can kill. Statistics show that seven out of 10 opioids that were used for recreation or another nonmedical purpose were taken from family medicine cabinets or shared with family members. Do not add to this danger. Never share your pain medications with anyone and secure them in a locked box.

## **10. Dispose of any unused medications**

Leftover pain medications make tempting targets for theft. They can also be dangerous if children find them. Many communities offer places for

you to drop off unused medications. Some states even sponsor special “take-back” events. To find a medication disposal site in your area visit:

- <http://umhealth.me/takebackmap> “Protect Your Community: Drug Disposal Information and Resources” and type in your location under the map to find locations to dispose of leftover medication.
- <http://disposemy meds.org/> and click on the link to: Dispose My Meds to do a search by zipcode.

If a take-back program is not available, experts recommend flushing leftover opioids down the toilet. While flushing is not recommended for most medications, leftover opioids are so risky that it is best to remove them from your house in this way. First, be sure your state or local laws do not prohibit flushing medications. When in doubt about proper disposal, check with your pharmacist.

## 11. Professional Help

If you have any questions please contact (734) 936-4000 to connect with your University of Michigan Health Systems healthcare provider.

Adapted from LifeSource: the 8 Opioid Safety Points for Patients:

<http://www.yourlifesource.org/patient-education/eight-steps/>.

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by the University of Michigan Health System (UMHS) for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by UMHS and for which UMHS does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan. UMHS does not recommend unsupervised self-management of health issues.

Patient Education by [University of Michigan Health System](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#). Last Revised 11/14/2016