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10 Questions Every Injured Employee Should Ask When Taking Opioids

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8 MIN READ

What are the most important things you need to know about your medicines?

Make sure you know about each of the medications you take. This includes why you take it, how to take it, what you can expect while you're taking it, and any warnings about the medication. The information provided in this document is general. So be sure to read the information that came with your medication. If you have any questions or concerns, talk to your pharmacist or doctor.

#1 Why are opioids used?

In the past, opioids were prescribed only for short periods of time for short-term pain or for cancer pain. Many providers now prescribe them for longer periods to treat chronic pain. You can take these drugs, which are sometimes called narcotics or opiates, to reduce pain and increase your functioning. Long-acting opioid pain relievers (also called extended-release opioids) are medicines used to relieve moderate to severe long-term pain. Opioids relieve pain by changing the way your body feels pain. They don't cure a health problem, but they help you manage the pain. If you take a lot of short-acting medicine, your doctor may prescribe long-acting opioids to help you avoid the ups and downs in pain relief associated with short-acting medicine. Opioids are strong medications. They can help you manage pain when you use them the right way. But if misused, can cause serious harm and even death. For these reasons, it is important to use them exactly as your doctor prescribes.

#2 What are some examples of opioids?

Examples of short-acting opioids

- Codeine (Tylenol[®] #3)
- Hydrocodone (Norco[®])
- Oxycodone (Percocet[®])

Examples of long-acting opioids

- Fentanyl patch (Duragesic[®])
- Methadone (Dolophine[®])

- Oxycodone controlled-release (OxyContin[®])

This is not a complete list of opioids.

#3 What about side effects?

All medications have side effects. But many people don't feel the side effects, or they are minimal. You may:

- Feel confused or have a hard time thinking clearly
- Experience constipation
- Feel faint, dizzy, or light-headed
- Feel drowsy
- Feel sick to your stomach or vomit
- Have an allergic reaction

Usually the benefits of the medicine are more beneficial than any minor side effects.

#4 What cautions should be considered with opioids?

Cautions for opioids include the following:

Follow directions carefully

It's easy to misuse opioids if you take a dose other than what's prescribed by your doctor. This can lead to overdose and even death. Also keep in mind that sharing them with someone they weren't meant for is considered misuse.

Some opioids contain acetaminophen (Tylenol)

Taking too much acetaminophen can be harmful. Check the labels on all the other medications you take, because many other medications also contain acetaminophen. This includes over-the-counter medications. Do not take other medications with acetaminophen in them unless your doctor has told you to. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have questions about this.

Opioids are strong medications

There is a risk for developing opioid use disorder. Moderate to severe opioid use disorder is sometimes called addiction. This means a person keeps using opioids even though it causes problems. The risk is greater for those with a history of substance use. Others who are more at risk are teenagers, older adults, people who have depression, and those who take high doses of this medication.

Do not drive or operate machinery

Opioids may affect your judgment and decision making. Talk with your doctor about when it is safe to drive.

Reduce the risk of drug interactions

Opioids can be dangerous if you take them with alcohol or with certain drugs like sleeping pills and muscle relaxers. Make sure your doctor knows about all the other medications you take, including over-the-counter medications. Don't start any new medication before you talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

Your body gets used to opioids

This may lead to tolerance and physical dependence.

Tolerance

Over time, you may need to take more of the drug to keep getting the same amount of pain relief. The danger is that tolerance greatly increases your risk of overdose, breathing emergencies, and death.

Physical Dependence

Your body has become used to having opioids, and you could have withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking them. Symptoms include nausea, sweating, chills, diarrhea, and shaking. Symptoms can be avoided if you slowly stop taking the medication as your doctor instructs you to. If you're taking opioids as part of a supervised care plan, tolerance and withdrawal may not mean that you have opioid use disorder.

#5 What should you do if you think you may have a problem with opioids?

If you think you may have a problem with opioids, talk to your doctor. Certain behaviors may mean that you're having trouble with opioids including:

- Using larger amounts of opioids than you meant to or using more than what your doctor prescribed
- Spending a lot of time getting or using opioids or recovering from the effects
- Not being able to function at work, at school, or at home
- Using opioids in situations where doing so is dangerous
- Not doing important activities because of your opioid use

When you have [opioid use disorder](#), withdrawal can be very difficult. But treatment is available to help you through that process.

Reduce the risk of overdose:

Misuse of opioids can be very dangerous. Protect yourself by asking your doctor about a naloxone rescue kit. It can help you—and even save your life—if you take too much of an opioid.

#6 When should you call for help?

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care.

For example, call if:

You have symptoms of a severe allergic reaction. These may include:

- Sudden raised, red areas (hives) all over your body
- Swelling of the throat, mouth, lips, or tongue
- Trouble breathing
- Passing out (losing consciousness) or feel very lightheaded or suddenly feel weak, confused, or restless

You have signs of an overdose. These may include:

- Cold, clammy skin
- Severe dizziness, drowsiness, or weakness
- Severe nervousness or restlessness

- Confusion
- Slow breathing
- Seizures

#7 When should you call your doctor or seek immediate medical care?

If you have symptoms of an allergic reaction, such as:

- A rash or hives (raised, red areas on the skin)
- Belly pain, nausea, or vomiting
- Itching or Swelling

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- You think you might be taking too much pain medicine, and you need help to take less or stop
- Your medicine is not helping with the pain
- You are having side effects, such as constipation

#8 Why are opioid pills and patches dangerous?

Children and pets are at high risk when an opioid is kept within their reach. Opioid skin patches, such as fentanyl, are the most dangerous. Even a used patch still has a high dose of medicine in it. Small children have been killed by opioid patches they've found in the trash at home.

Opioids can also be misused or stolen. Be sure to store your medication in a safe and secure place. When you are done using opioid medication, get rid of it right away, and in the safest way you can.

#9 How do you safely store opioid pills and patches?

It's important to store opioids safely so that they aren't used by the wrong person. Your pain medicine is only for you to take. If someone else takes your medicine, it can be harmful to that person.

Follow these tips to safely store your medications:

- Store pills and patches up high and out of sight
 - Keep them away from children and pets
 - Return the container to the same place each time you take your medication
- Try locking your opioid medication in a cabinet
- Make sure the bottles are closed tightly

If it has a safety cap, make sure that it's locked. Tighten the cap until you hear a click or can't twist it anymore.

- Keep track of how many pills or patches you have left. You may want to keep track in a notebook.
- Let the people who live with you know about your medications
 - Tell them that it is only for you to take
 - If guests have opioid medication with them, ask them to keep it safe

#10 How can you safely discard opioid pills and patches?

If you have opioid pills or patches that you are not going to use, get rid of them right away. Do not keep your opioid medications or opioid patches for later use.

The U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA) recommends that you take your opioid pills and patches to a drop-off box or take-back program that is authorized by the U.S. [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) (DEA).

Your local trash and recycle center, pharmacy, or hospital may offer one of these.

If you can't get to a DEA-authorized site right away and your medication doesn't have specific [disposal information](#) (such as flushing), you can dispose of them in your household trash using these steps.

1. Take the medication out of its container
2. Mix it with something that tastes bad, such as cat litter or coffee grounds
3. Place the mixture in a sealed plastic bag, and put the bag in your household trash

Only flush your medications down the toilet if you can't get to a [DEA-approved site](#) or if your medication instructions state clearly to flush them.

You can also go to the FDA website to see a [list of medications](#) that should be flushed.

Take special care with used opioid patches. As soon as you peel a patch off of your skin, fold it in half with the sticky sides together.

Immediately take it to a DEA-authorized site or flush it down the toilet if a DEA-authorized site isn't available in your area. Do not throw them in the trash.

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