

Tapering opioid drugs



Prescription opioids can be addictive and cause important side effects, and their ability to relieve pain can decrease over time.

One way of dealing with this is to try and reduce reliance on these habit-forming medications, and to stop them altogether if possible.

By focusing on non-opioid options for pain management, you can still treat your pain and improve function.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
<i>I have been on this dose for years. Why do I need to change it now?</i>	Even if you're on the same opioid drug dose for a long time, you can develop opioid-related side effects and risks. Lowering your opioid dose can help reduce your chance of side effects like constipation, sedation, low male hormones in men, and accidental overdose, among others.
<i>Why do I need to reduce my opioid dose if nothing else helps me?</i>	After prolonged use, opioid drugs may stop working, and continuing to take them just prevents withdrawal symptoms. But non-opioid medications and non-drug options can be very useful in managing pain and improving function, and are not addictive. These can reduce the dose of opioid you need, or may even replace it.
<i>What can I do to manage my pain if I am not using an opioid?</i>	Your healthcare professional can recommend prescription and over-the-counter medications that are effective pain relievers. Non-drug options such as exercise, tai chi, or acupuncture can also help relieve pain and improve your ability to perform daily tasks. Combining these options while tapering opioid doses can help reach your pain management goals. Discuss this with your healthcare professional.
<i>Do I have to stop opioids completely?</i>	For some people, tapering opioid drugs down to zero may be the safest treatment option. For others, the goal may be to reduce doses to decrease the risk of the side effects and harms these drugs can cause.
<i>If I still have pain, won't my pain increase as my opioid dose is reduced?</i>	Many people who have tapered to lower doses or stopped opioid medications altogether report no difference in pain relief. Some with chronic pain who have stopped taking opioids report feeling better than when they were taking opioids, though these benefits can take time to develop.
<i>Will I have symptoms of withdrawal (such as anxiety, fast heart rate or diarrhea) when I reduce my opioid dose?</i>	If you have been taking opioids for a long time, your body may be used to them. A taper plan developed with your healthcare professional can help reduce your risk of developing withdrawal symptoms. He or she can also recommend supportive medications and/or adjust the taper plan based on your individual response.



Balanced information for better care

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These are general recommendations only; specific clinical decisions should be made by the treating clinician based on an individual patient's clinical condition.

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