

# PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS & OPIOID USE DISORDER

## A Guide for Families

**Prescription opioids** are powerful painkillers that disrupt pain signals in the central nervous system, offering relief from both acute and chronic pain. For acute pain, typically following surgery, medications like hydrocodone with acetaminophen, oxycodone (e.g., Roxicodone), and oxycodone with acetaminophen (e.g., Percocet) are used for short-term treatment. Chronic pain, lasting over 45 days and often linked to illnesses like cancer, may be treated with buprenorphine, methadone, or extended-release oxycodone (e.g., OxyContin).

**Illegal opioids**, such as heroin and synthetic fentanyl, are extremely potent. Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine and is often mixed with other drugs, leading to many fatal overdoses. Fentanyl poses significant risks due to its presence in counterfeit pills that resemble prescription medications.

### Risks of Opioid Use

While opioids can be lifesavers for those suffering from pain, they can be dangerous. Not only do they work well to reduce physical pain, but they also can numb emotional pain. The use of illegal opioids or misuse of prescribed opioids can lead to addiction, also known as opioid use disorder (OUD). OUD is a serious medical condition where individuals continue using opioids despite facing harmful consequences. This disorder is driven by two powerful forces: the relief opioids provide and the physical dependence that develops over time. As the body becomes reliant on the drug, stopping its use triggers unbearable withdrawal symptoms, making it incredibly difficult for individuals to quit. Understanding these risks and the nature of OUD is crucial to preventing it and intervening when necessary to help family members affected by it.

### Preventing Opioid Use Disorder

It's important to understand the risks of opioid use and to explore non-opioid pain management options, such as physical therapy, acupuncture, exercise, and over-the-counter pain relievers like acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil). These alternatives can often be effective without the risks associated with opioid medications. When opioids are necessary, doctors should prescribe the lowest effective dose for the shortest duration possible. Regular check-ins with the doctor can ensure the medication is being used safely and effectively.

Patients need to talk openly with their doctors about any concerns or side effects they may experience.

Families can help by monitoring medication use, keeping pills locked up, and properly disposing of unused medications using take-back programs or prescription disposal products.

## Recognizing and Addressing Opioid Use Disorder

Signs of OUD include:

- A strong need or craving to use opioids
- Trouble controlling or cutting down on use
- Continuing to use opioids despite the problems they cause at home, school, or work
- Spending a lot of time getting or using opioids or recovering from opioid use
- Needing more opioids to feel the same effect (tolerance)
- Feeling severe flu-like symptoms when not using (withdrawal symptoms)

If you notice signs of OUD in a loved one, start with a supportive conversation about opioid risks and alternative pain relief options. Medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) like methadone, buprenorphine, or naltrexone, combined with therapies like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, can be effective. Support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and SMART Recovery offer a community of people who understand the struggles and can provide encouragement and additional support.

## Emergency Preparedness and Harm Reduction

Learn about naloxone, a medication that can reverse opioid overdoses, and keep it readily available. Knowing how to do rescue breathing while waiting for emergency responders can also be lifesaving. Consider harm-reduction strategies like using clean needles, drug test strips, naloxone, and resources such as the Brave app or Never Use Alone service to lower substance use risks.

By being **attentive, compassionate, and proactive**, you can make a significant difference in helping someone **manage and overcome opioid use disorder.**

### Additional Resources

**RxAware:** Non-addictive pain management

<https://drugfree.org/rxaware>

**Medications for OUD**

<https://drugfree.org/article/medications-to-treat-opioid-use-disorder>

**Naloxone information**

<https://drugfree.org/naloxone-overdose-reversal-drug>

**Harm reduction**

<https://drugfree.org/harm-reduction-resource-center>