



# Opioid painkillers: What you need to know before you start taking them

Opioids are powerful medications that are prescribed for many types of pain, the flu or a cough.

## Common reactions

While opioids are very effective medications, you can have reactions to them. They can make you:

- sleepy
- sick to your stomach
- constipated
- feel confused
- dizzy

These reactions can happen suddenly and while taking the usual dose of your medicine. Be careful to follow your doctor's or pharmacist's instructions. Many opioids will take about 90 minutes to become fully active in your body. Be sure to check the warning labels on the bottle: you may need to be careful going about ordinary activities such as driving.

## Serious reactions

If you take more than prescribed, or combine opioids with alcohol or some other drugs, such as sleep aids and anti-anxiety medications, they can cause

- clammy skin
- weak muscles
- dangerously low blood pressure
- slowed or stopped breathing
- coma
- death

EXAMPLES OF OPIOID CONTAINING MEDICINES		
	Generic	Brand Name
SHORT-ACTING	morphine	MSIR, Roxanol
	oxycodone	OxyIR, Oxyfast, Endocodone
	oxycodone (with acetaminophen)	Roxicod, Roxicet, Percocet, Tylox, Endocet
	hydrocodone (with acetaminophen)	Vicodin, Lorcet, Lortab, Zydone, Hydrocet, Norco
	hydromorphone	Dilaudid, Hydrostat
LONG-ACTING	morphine	MSContin, Oramorph SR, Kadian, Avinza
	oxycodone	Oxycontin
	fentanyl	Duragesic patch

1.4 million emergency room visits in 2011 were related to the misuse or abuse of prescription medicines, an increase of 114% since 2004.<sup>1</sup>

## Do not share opioid pain medications

Never share medication your doctor has given you; even with family members. You may be endangering someone's life if you let them take your medicine.

## Long-term problems

If you take opioids for a long time, your body can feel less of their effect, and you may feel the need to use more of the drug to get results. Do not use more without talking to your doctor. Taking more opioids can increase the chance that you may have side effects or overdose. Opioids are highly addictive medications so it's important to work closely with your doctor.

## What can I do to prevent problems?

While these drugs are effective for pain, you may want to ask your doctor if you can try a non-opioid drug first. Also, if you do take opioids, talk to your doctor about limiting the time you take them. Tell your doctor about all other medications and drugs you take and about how much alcohol you consume. Ask your doctor about whether, and when you can drive and be sure to discuss the nature of your work and how you may be impaired.

Opioid painkillers can be dangerous and need to be disposed of promptly and properly. If you have any medicine left over, you can bring your medication to a drug take-back collection site or event. Take-back programs allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal. If your community does not have a take-back program, you can visit [nsc.org/disposalresources](http://nsc.org/disposalresources) to learn how to throw away the medicine safely.

**National Safety Council**  
1121 SPRING LAKE DRIVE  
ITASCA, IL 60143-3201  
(800) 621-7619  
[nsc.org](http://nsc.org)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2013) The DAWN Report: Highlights of the 2011 Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) Findings on Drug-Related Emergency Department Visits. Rockville, MD. Retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/2k13/DAWN127/sr127-DAWN-highlights.htm>