

Prescription Pain Medicine: “Hooking” You or Helping You?

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Do you find that pain interferes with your daily activities? Or perhaps you are forced to watch as your spouse or loved one suffers from terrible pain? If so, your physician can help by prescribing pain medication. Often, the most effective pain relief is provided by opioid medications (sometimes called narcotics). Morphine, oxycodone, Vicodin (hydrocodone with acetaminophen), and fentanyl are some examples of this type of medication. They can be very helpful for people with arthritis, cancer, spinal stenosis, and other chronic, painful conditions. Unfortunately, many people do not want to try these medications that can relieve their pain and help them increase their enjoyment in their daily life. Instead they choose to try to “tough it out.” When their doctors ask them why, most people will say they are afraid of narcotic or opioid medicines.

Common concerns about taking opioids:

- ✓ The fear of becoming “hooked” or addicted.
- ✓ The fear of side effects like drowsiness, confusion, constipation, and nausea.
- ✓ The fear of using the “best” medicine “too early” and losing the pain-killing effect.

Why it is OK to say “yes” to taking opioids:

- ✓ **You won’t become a “drug addict”:** After a certain period of time, your body becomes physically accustomed to an opioid medication. This is called dependence. This is not the same as becoming addicted to the drug. Addiction happens when someone becomes psychologically drawn to the medicine and they find they crave it even when they are not in pain. You should know that people who are truly in pain rarely develop this psychological craving and are able to stop taking the medication if they choose to do so. It is important to recognize that those who use prescription medication to relieve pain don’t steal or commit crimes to get their medication. All of this means that, *while you may become physically dependent on the medicine, you are NOT addicted to it.*
- ✓ **You won’t have to endure bad side effects:** As mentioned above, there are several possible side effects to opioid pain medications that people find unpleasant. Many of these side effects, like nausea and constipation, can be easily managed with other medicines or non-medical therapies. If you should become confused or sleepy, it is very easy for your doctor to adjust the amount of medicine you are taking to a dose that you find has less of those side effects. The most important thing is to *talk with your doctor* – they can’t help you if they don’t know you’re experiencing side effects.
- ✓ **You won’t lose the pain-killing effect permanently:** If you need to use opioid pain medications for a long time (the exact amount of time varies from person to person), you will begin to notice that the medication seems to be losing its effect. This is called developing a “tolerance,” and is expected. When this happens, be sure to mention it to your doctor. They can then increase your dosage or change over to a different medication. There is no need to worry about using up the “best” medicine too soon – there are plenty of different types of opioid pain medication available and all of them are very effective in relieving pain.

Overall, if you are in so much pain that you find yourself avoiding the people and/or activities that you used to enjoy, opioid pain medication is often your best chance at returning to a more normal and meaningful life. If you wish more information regarding the use of pain medicines, we recommend you schedule an appointment with your physician.

REFERENCES

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