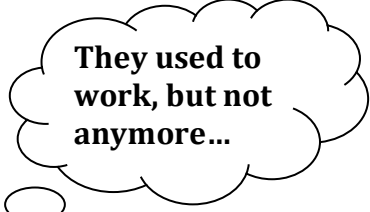


Opioid Tapering – Information for Chronic Pain Patients

Why taper?

There are lots of reasons why you may wish to reduce or taper your opioid medication. Some of these reasons include:

- Worried about long-term health and side effects
- Feeling “trapped” by opioids – not being able to suddenly stop taking them because of withdrawal symptoms
- Still having lots of pain despite being on strong pain medication
- Not being able to do many activities despite being on strong pain medication
- Worried about accidental overdosing, especially with all the recent news reports
- Worried about judgment or stigma



They used to work, but not anymore...

What are the long-term effects of opioids?



My pain can get worse from being on opioids?!

- Sleep apnea or worsened sleep quality
 - Opioids can cause unrefreshing and non-restorative sleep
- Decrease in sex hormones including testosterone and estrogen
 - This can decrease your energy levels, worsen mood, cause difficulties with sexual health, and lead to osteoporosis (thin bones)
- Opioid-induced hyperalgesia, which means an increase in pain sensitivity
 - Pain can seem to worsen over time when you are on opioids, and the pain can spread to places in your body where it wasn't there originally
- Chance of becoming addicted
- Risk of having an accidental overdose
 - Ask your healthcare provider about getting a naloxone kit
- Other concerns include:
 - Decrease in your immune system
 - Decrease in your memory and thinking ability
 - Increase in your risk of having a heart attack, car accident, or fall
 - Increase in your risk of depression



How do I taper my opioids?

- Slowly! Ask for support from your healthcare team and your family. You didn't get on to opioids quickly, and so it is not expected for you to get off of them quickly. It can take a few months.
 - An initial decrease of your total daily opioid dose by 10-20% every 1-2 weeks is well-tolerated by most patients
 - You may get slight withdrawal symptoms or a mild flare-up of your pain about 2-4 days after a dose is reduced, but this will settle down
- Never return to a previous higher dose! This is not safe due to risk of overdose, and makes it more difficult to have a successful taper.

- If you are having difficulties, one option may be to talk to your physician about allowing a longer time for your body to adjust to the new lower dose (e.g. wait 3-4 weeks instead of reducing after 1-2 weeks, and then continue the taper).
- It is often easier to taper by a larger amount initially (e.g. 20%), and then it can be more difficult to taper once you reach the last one-third of your original daily dose
- Ask your pharmacy to blister pack your opioids and give them to you one week at a time, to help you stay on track

What should I expect after tapering my opioids?

- Many patients report feeling more alert, and coming “out of the fog”
- Side effects improve, along with your overall health
- Mood and sleep improve, and you feel more clear-headed
- Activity levels improve, because you aren’t as tired or groggy
- Overall your pain levels may be the same (or better if opioids were making you more sensitive to pain!), and you’ll be on a much lower dose and feel better as a result



What is physical dependence and withdrawal? Is it the same as addiction?

Your body is physically dependent on opioids, which is a normally occurring process that can happen to anyone. Suddenly stopping opioids or reducing by large amounts will cause withdrawal symptoms, which can include:

- Feeling anxious or restless, sweating and chills, runny nose, watery eyes, yawning, widespread muscle aches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramping, difficulty with sleep, and generally feeling like you have the flu.
- Going slow with your opioid taper helps to lessen these withdrawal symptoms.

Physical dependence and withdrawal symptoms are different than addiction, which is a complex condition involving loss of control of your opioid use.

How can I have a successful opioid taper?

It’s a good idea to make plans for:



Sleep	
Nutrition	
Movement	
Productivity	
Relationships	
Mindfulness	
Mental health	

Flare-Up Plan

Mild (e.g. stretching, walking, fresh air, cup of tea, music, breathing)
Moderate (e.g. hot/cold packs, yoga, meditation, call friend or family for support)
Severe (e.g. hot bath/shower, rest in quiet dark room)