

If you stop taking opioids suddenly, you may get symptoms of withdrawal. These symptoms include:

- Sweating, fever, nausea, vomiting, feeling agitated or irritable

Withdrawal symptoms are a sign that your body is used to taking opioids regularly and that you need to reduce the opioids more slowly.

Taking other pain relieving medications such as Tylenol or Ibuprofen (anti-inflammatory) may help you reduce the opioids. You should discuss with your doctor if these are appropriate.

Other non-medicinal therapies can also help you take less opioids. These include:

- Raising the operative limb, applying ice packs for short periods of time and relaxation techniques.

## How to store opioid medication

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Use of opioid medications by someone other than who it is prescribed for is a serious problem.

You can help limit this problem by safely storing and disposing opioid medications (see below) in your home while you are using them.

**These medications should be kept out of sight and ideally in a hidden or locked area.**

Make sure you keep your opioid medications safely out of reach of children and the elderly as taking these can cause harm to them.

## How to dispose of extra opioid medication

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If you have unused opioids, it is important that you dispose of them correctly. **In British Columbia, most pharmacies have a drug return program where they will properly dispose of extra medications.**

You may also dispose of them by crushing the pills into coffee grounds, kitty litter or another unpleasant product, which can then be thrown into the garbage. Never save medications, thinking you may use them at a later date. All medications have expiration dates and may not be safe to take later. If you require more opioid medications in the future, please see your doctor to discuss another prescription.

Your prescription for opioids is only for you to take. Never share or give your medications to others, as it is illegal. Giving or selling these medications to others will put their health at risk.

## Summary

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Treating your pain is important for your recovery after surgery. Opioids are commonly prescribed and are effective medications for treating pain after surgery. These medications are safe as long as they are taken as prescribed.

To avoid unwanted side effects, the goal is to take only the amount you need to treat your pain. When reducing opioids, always lower your dose slowly.

It is important to store these medications securely while using them.

Careful disposal of unused opioid medications is important for the well-being of yourself, your loved ones and the community.

# Opioid Tapering

Information for patients taking opioid medication after hospitalization



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This pamphlet is intended to provide general information and may not apply to your situation.

The information in this document is intended solely for the person to whom it was given by the health care team.  
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Read this booklet to learn about:

- Using opioid medications for pain management
- Why you reduce opioid medication
- How to cut back slowly
- How to store opioid medications
- How to dispose of extra opioid medication

This pamphlet is intended to provide general information and may not apply to your situation.

Everybody experiences pain differently. The level of pain you have depends on the type of surgery you had as well as pre-existing conditions before surgery.

If you have any questions, you are always advised to talk to your doctor.

## Opioid Medications

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After surgery, you have been prescribed opioids as part of your recovery plan. Opioids are an important class of pain relieving medications. Commonly prescribed opioids are:

- **Codeine:** Tylenol 3
- **Morphine:** M-Eslon, MS Contin
- **Oxycodone:** Percocet, Endocet, OxyNeo
- **Hydromorphone** (Dilaudid)

Opioid medications reduce the pain you feel. Not all opioids are the same. They differ in their strength and length of time they stay in your body.

Controlling your pain helps in your recovery after surgery for the following reasons:

- To help you resume your daily activities
- To help you sleep
- To help you do physiotherapy.

Side effects of opioid medications include sleepiness, confusion, nausea, vomiting, constipation, itchiness, inability to urinate and slowed breathing.

All of these side effects may occur at low doses but are more common at higher doses. The goal is to take the least amount of opioids to control your pain, which will limit side effects.

The most serious side effect is slowed breathing (or respiratory depression).

This life-threatening medical emergency occurs with taking too high a dose. It is unlikely to occur if you take opioid medications as prescribed. Do not take more than your doctor has ordered.

Certain medical conditions, such as obstructive sleep apnea, may place you at a greater risk of respiratory depression. If you have sleep apnea, you must take extra care while taking opioid medications.

Use caution while using opioid medications with other sedating medications. These include medications that help with nervousness and sleep. It is best to talk to your doctor or pharmacist when you are prescribed opioids along with these medications. Do not drink alcohol while taking opioids as life-threatening sedation may occur.

## Why you should wean off opioid medication

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Long-term use of opioids may lead to addiction and dependency. However, if you are taking these medications for surgical pain and reducing the dose as your pain improves, the chance this will occur is very low.

Continuing to take opioid medications after your surgical pain has improved may place you at risk for dependency and addiction.

About 5% of patients remain on opioids one year after surgery. Continuing to take these medications for long periods may slow your overall recovery.

## How to taper off opioid medication

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For most surgeries, the worst pain is in the first 48–72 hours after surgery. This is from the incision(s) and the swelling around the site. As the site heals, the pain you feel should improve. When the surgical pain becomes manageable, you should start to reduce how much opioids you take.

### When starting to reduce opioids:

#### 1. Start to lower the dose (the number of pills you take).

For example:

- If you were taking 2 pills each time, start taking 1 pill to see if it controls the pain fine. If it does, continue with 1 pill each time.
- Do this for 1–2 days.

#### 2. After step 1, start to increase the amount of time between doses.

For example:

- If you are taking a dose every 4 hours, extend that time.
- Take a dose every 6 hours for 1–2 days.
- Then take a dose every 8 hours for 1–2 days.
- Then consider stopping.