

Spotlight on Health

The Opioid Epidemic

Prescription opioids are powerful drugs that relieve pain. But they also have serious risks and side effects. Some patients may have a hard time controlling how much they use. Using too much drug can put them at risk of death from an overdose.

We are currently seeing a rise in drug overdose deaths in the U.S. In fact, more people died of drug overdoses in 2014 than in any prior year. Of these deaths, 63% involved opioids.¹ Two thirds of these deaths involved prescription opioids. The remaining third involved heroin. Some experts say that the increase has been caused by more people taking opioid drugs than ever before. People call this the opioid epidemic.

In this issue of Spotlight on Health, we talk about what doctors, patients, and the laboratory can do. By working together, patients can stay safe while getting the pain relief they need.

What Can Your Doctor Do?

Your doctor can take actions to help keep you safe while treating your pain. These actions include:

- Talking to you about the risks and benefits of opioid drugs
- Offering other treatment options that might be helpful
- Checking to see if you already have a prescription for an opioid drug
- Using urine drug testing to make sure you are taking your medication
- Using urine drug testing to be sure you are not taking other drugs
- Using pill counts to make sure you are not increasing your dose

What Can You Do?

If your doctor prescribes opioids for you, you can stay safe by:

- Always following directions when taking drugs for pain. Don't take drugs in greater amounts or more often than prescribed
- Talking to your doctor about any and all side effects and concerns
- Not drinking alcohol while taking opioid drugs
- Telling your doctor about all of your medication, drug, and alcohol use
- Checking in regularly with your doctor
- Watching for signs of opioid use disorder; if you or your loved one has it, get treatment
- Learning about [naloxone](#); it could save a life in case of an opioid overdose



Opioid Use Disorder

Some patients have a hard time cutting down or controlling their drug use. They may have opioid use disorder. More than 40% of people get this disorder after using opioids for pain.² Signs may include:

- Taking more drug than prescribed
- Not keeping up with chores, work, or school
- Using drugs even though it is causing problems with loved ones and friends
- Giving up fun activities
- Needing greater amounts of drug to have the same effect as when they were first taken
- Feeling stressed, sore, and sick when drug use stops and then feeling better after taking it again

To find out how to help someone who might have opioid use disorder, click [here](#).

To prevent misuse or abuse of opioid drugs you can:

- Store opioid pain relievers in a safe place and out of reach of others
- Don't share or sell your opioid pain relievers
- Don't use opioid drugs that belong to someone else
- Get rid of unused medication safely.
 - Read [How to Dispose of Unused Medicines](#)
 - Find out where you can take unused drugs in your local area

What Can the Laboratory Do?

The lab performs the drug tests ordered by your doctor. Then the lab compares your test results with a list of the drugs your doctor has prescribed. This helps the doctor find out if there is any unexpected drug use. It also helps the doctor find out if you could be at risk for any dangerous drug interactions.

Additional Information

You can find more information at WebMD (www.webmd.com/pain-management/guide/narcotic-pain-medications).

Some Common Opioid Prescription Drugs for Pain

- Buprenorphine
- Codeine
- Fentanyl
- Hydrocodone
- Hydromorphone
- Meperidine
- Methadone
- Morphine
- Oxycodone
- Oxymorphone

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Number and age-adjusted rates of drug-poisoning deaths involving opioid analgesics and heroin: United States, 2000–2014. National Vital Statistics System, Mortality File. [Internet]. Atlanta, GA. 2015. Available at: cdc.gov/nchs/data/health_policy/AADR_drug_poisoning_involving_OA_Heroin_US_2000-2014.pdf. Accessed June 16, 2016.
2. Boscarino JA, Hoffman SN, Han JJ. Opioid-use disorder among patients on long-term opioid therapy: impact of final DSM-5 diagnostic criteria on prevalence and correlates. *Subst Abuse Rehabil*. 2015;6:83-91.