

# Spotlight on Health

## Prescription Drug Monitoring

Opioids are powerful drugs used to relieve pain. You have probably heard about the opioid epidemic. Many people have become dependent on opioids. Others have developed what is called opioid use disorder (OUD), which is having a hard time cutting down or controlling use of these drugs. Large numbers of people with OUD have overdosed and died. Deaths due to combinations of prescribed and nonprescribed drugs have also increased. These combinations include opioids and tranquilizers.

This newsletter discusses the use and misuse of prescriptions drugs, and the benefits of drug testing to monitor prescription drug use.

### Benefits of Opioid Medications

Opioid medications are not necessarily “bad” drugs. For many years they were the only drugs available to relieve severe pain. Even today, opioids are important for helping many people. For example, patients with severe chronic pain due to serious diseases like cancer may be prescribed opioids. Opioid medications are also often used to relieve pain for the first few days after major surgery. The sidebar on this page lists some common opioids.

### The Opioid Epidemic

Drug overdose deaths in the United States are increasing. Most of these deaths involve opioids. Deaths from opioid overdose have tripled since 1999.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, there were over 32,000 deaths involving prescription opioids, or about 89 deaths each day.<sup>2</sup> Mixing opioids with other drugs has also increased the number of deaths.<sup>3</sup> Such drugs include benzodiazepine tranquilizers (“benzo’s” for short; one example is Valium® [diazepam]) and alcohol.<sup>3</sup>

Why the increase? One reason is that prescription opioids can be highly addictive.<sup>4</sup> Once this became widely understood healthcare providers wrote fewer prescriptions for opioids. As prescriptions for opioids decreased, some people with OUD started using heroin. Recently, people with OUD have begun using fentanyl, a prescription drug that is much more powerful than morphine.<sup>5</sup> Fentanyl mixed with heroin has increased the number of opioid deaths.<sup>3</sup> Criminals often mix fentanyl with heroin and users don’t know how much or what they are taking. This makes overdose more likely.

### Urine Drug Testing Is Important and Can Save Lives

Healthcare providers often ask for a urine drug test before prescribing an opioid, or another drug that can be abused. If you have to take opioids for a long time, they may also test during treatment. It’s not a lack of trust. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends urine drug testing before starting opioid drug therapy and during therapy.<sup>6</sup> Testing can help to reduce the chance of an accidental overdose.

### How Your Healthcare Provider Can Help

Honest communication with your healthcare provider about the drugs you are taking will help you get the best possible care. Healthcare providers can help you understand the risks of taking some drugs and combinations, and why urine drug



### Some Common Opioid Prescription Drugs for Pain

- Buprenorphine
- Codeine
- Fentanyl
- Hydrocodone
- Hydromorphone
- Meperidine (Demerol®)
- Methadone
- Morphine
- Oxycodone
- Oxymorphone

testing is important. They can help you decide on the best method to control pain, and that it is not always with medication. They can also talk to you about alternatives to opioids that are effective and not addictive and that have fewer side effects.

## What You Can Do

### To avoid dangerous drug combinations:

- Don't drink alcohol while taking your medicines.
- Don't use any drugs that belong to someone else.
- Get your medications only from your pharmacy.
- Tell your healthcare provider about all of your medication, drug, and alcohol use.

### To prevent misuse or abuse of opioid drugs:

- Store opioids in a safe place and out of reach of others.
- Don't share or sell your opioid pain relievers.
- Find out how to safely get rid of unused drugs. Most pharmacies have this information.

### If your healthcare provider prescribes opioids for you, to stay safe:

- Always follow directions.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about side effects and concerns.
- Check in regularly with your healthcare provider.
- Watch for signs of opioid addiction (See Medline Plus: [Medlineplus.gov/opioidabuseandaddiction.html](http://Medlineplus.gov/opioidabuseandaddiction.html)).
- Learn about naloxone, a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose. (See Opioid overdose reversal with naloxone: [Drugabuse.gov/related-topics/opioid-overdose-reversal-naloxone-narcan-evzio](http://Drugabuse.gov/related-topics/opioid-overdose-reversal-naloxone-narcan-evzio)).

## How the Laboratory Can Help

The lab performs the drug tests ordered by your healthcare provider. The lab may then compare your results with a list of drugs your healthcare provider has prescribed for you. Drug testing helps the healthcare provider find out if there is any unexpected drug use. They also can find out if there may be dangerous drug interactions. Quest Diagnostics can also perform genetic testing to see if your body metabolizes opioids faster or slower than the average person.

## Additional Information

For more information, visit the **National Institute on Drug Abuse** at [Drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis](http://Drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis), or these helpful websites:

- **Understanding the Opioid Epidemic:** [PBS.org/wned/opioid-epidemic/home/](http://PBS.org/wned/opioid-epidemic/home/)
- **Web MD:** [WebMD.com/mental-health/addiction/benzodiazepine-abuse#1](http://WebMD.com/mental-health/addiction/benzodiazepine-abuse#1)
- **Opioid Use Disorder and Treatment:** [AAFP.org/afp/2018/0301/p313-s1.html](http://AAFP.org/afp/2018/0301/p313-s1.html)

## References

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4. Rummans TA, Burton MC, Dawson NL. How good intentions contributed to bad outcomes: the opioid crisis. *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2018;93:344–350.
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