

PRESCRIPTION PAIN MEDICATIONS

JUST BECAUSE A DOCTOR PRESCRIBES THEM DOESN'T MEAN THEY ARE SAFE TO ABUSE

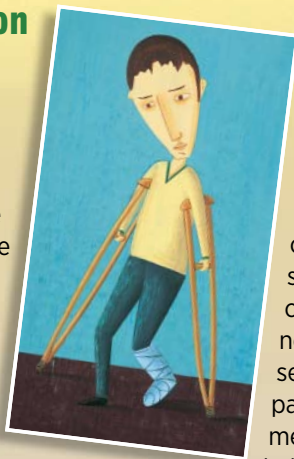


PROPER USE

What Are Prescription Painkillers?

Prescription painkillers are strong pain relievers that include the *opioid* class of drugs, including hydrocodone (e.g., Vicodin®) and oxycodone (e.g., OxyContin®). Opioids work by mimicking the body's natural pain-relieving chemicals, but they are more powerful and longer lasting.

When the body senses pain following an injury or surgery, specialized nerve cells relay "pain" messages to the spinal cord and brain. In response to these messages, natural pain-relieving chemicals—endorphins and enkephalins—are released and attach themselves to the body's opioid receptors, where they have several functions. In the spinal cord, they decrease pain-related signals being transmitted to the brain. In the brain, they act in a number of areas, including those that interpret pain-



related information and are involved in emotional responses. This reduces the sensation of pain and any associated feelings of suffering. Although our natural opioid system can relieve certain types of pain, it's not equipped to handle severe and prolonged pain. That's when opioid medications can be helpful.

Why Do Opioids Require a Prescription?

Opioids require a prescription because they are powerful medications. Although they are used safely each year by millions of Americans who are in pain, if not taken properly, opioids can result in severe health complications, or even death.

Before writing a prescription for opioids, your doctor must evaluate several factors, including your level of pain (or expected pain after surgery), weight, other medical conditions, any other medications you are taking, and your current or past drug-use history. The doctor will then decide:

- whether an opioid pain reliever is necessary;
- if a prescription opioid will safely and effectively treat your pain; and
- the correct dosage and how long you should take it.

Your doctor will instruct you on how to safely take the medication, including which medications or over-the-counter drugs to avoid and the warning signs to watch for in case you have a bad reaction.

By following your doctor's instructions carefully, you'll be less likely to suffer serious side effects as a result of taking the drug.

You know that abusing drugs like cocaine and heroin can lead to addiction and other serious health consequences. But did you know that abusing prescription painkillers—taking someone else’s prescription, or even taking your own in ways other than as prescribed—can be just as dangerous?

The fact is, it can. But with nearly 1 in 10 high school seniors reporting nonmedical use of

Vicodin® in the past year, some teens haven’t gotten the message.¹ Why are these teens risking their health and maybe even their lives? They may think prescription drugs are *safer* to abuse than illegal “street” drugs—after all, the thinking goes, doctors prescribe them, so they must be safe. But that’s not the whole story. Read on to find out the facts.

¹ “Monitoring the Future Survey, Overview of Findings 2009,” National Institute on Drug Abuse, <http://drugabuse.gov/newsroom/09/MTF09overview.html>.

ABUSE

Why Is Abusing Prescription Opioids Dangerous?

Abusing prescription opioids can put your health and life at serious risk. Opioids can make you drowsy, nauseous, constipated, and confused. They can also depress your breathing and lead to addiction or overdose.

- **Overdose:** Abuse of opioids, alone or in combination with alcohol or other drugs, can slow or even stop your breathing and result in a loss of consciousness, a coma, or worse. In fact, the number of accidental fatal poisonings involving prescription pain relievers has more than tripled since 1999.
- **Physical Dependence:** Long-term use of opioids can make the body dependent, and when you stop taking them, you could experience withdrawal symptoms, like muscle

You are abusing opioids if . . .	Risks
they were prescribed to you, but you take more (higher doses or more often) than you were directed.	If the pain medication isn’t relieving your pain, why not go back to the doctor? Your condition may be getting worse and a different remedy might be needed. By taking more medication, you could be masking important symptoms.
you got them from a friend to help relieve your pain.	Pain medications come in different varieties and doses. Some are made for people who have chronic pain and need high doses to relieve their pain. Their bodies have adapted to the repeated opioid exposure, but yours has not. Taking one of their pills could have serious repercussions for you.
you take them to get high.	Whether or not they were prescribed to you, if you are taking opioids to get high, you are setting yourself up to become addicted. The risks increase when you take them in combination with other drugs (like alcohol or marijuana or other prescription medications) or by methods other than those prescribed.

and bone pain, diarrhea, vomiting, or cold flashes. If you are under a doctor’s care, he or she can help you avoid or manage these symptoms.

- **Addiction:** Opioid receptors are found in the parts of the brain involved in emotional responses, including pleasure. In fact, heroin is an illegal opioid drug that acts on the same receptor system as prescription opioids. However, the dose and the way a drug is taken can affect how a person responds to it. People who abuse opioids often take them in doses or by methods (crushed, snorted, or

injected) other than prescribed. This can lead to high doses reaching the brain rapidly, increasing the risk of overdose and addiction.

Important Resources

- For information on drugs: <http://teens.drugabuse.gov> or www.scholastic.com/headsup
- For help with a crisis: 1-800-273-TALK
- To find a treatment center: 1-800-662-HELP or <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

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