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What to Ask Your Doctor Before Taking Opioids

Every patient should ask questions when getting a new prescription. This is especially important when your doctor, dentist or other health care professional prescribes you an opioid, such as hydrocodone, oxycodone, codeine and morphine.

What should you ask?

1. Why do I need this medication — is it right for me?

This conversation could begin like this: “My condition is causing pain. How long do you expect it to last? What medication are you giving me? If it’s an opioid, **are there non-opioid options that could help with pain relief while I recover?**”

Opioids approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can be used to treat certain kinds of acute and chronic pain. They also can have some very serious side effects.

If your doctor thinks your pain is best managed with a prescription opioid, then ask:

2. How long should I take this medication?

Find out when and how to stop using, or taper off, opioids. Ask that your doctor prescribe the lowest dose and the smallest quantity you may need and find out when to call to follow up on how well it is working. Other questions to consider:

How can I reduce the risk of potential side effects from this medication?

Take your medicine exactly as prescribed by your health care provider. If you are still feeling pain, call your health care provider; do not take an extra dose. Learn to identify serious side effects (such as excessive sleepiness or a feeling of craving more of the medication) so you and your family will know when to call a doctor or go to the hospital. Ask your pharmacist if your prescription comes with a Medication Guide (paper handouts that come with many prescription medicines) for more information.

What if I have a history of addiction? Tell your health care provider about any history you have had with substance misuse or addiction to drugs or alcohol and if you have a history of smoking cigarettes. You should also tell your health care provider if anyone in your family has had a problem with substance misuse, alcoholism or drug addiction.

What about the other medications I'm taking? It is also very important that you tell your health care provider about all of the medicines you are taking, especially those prescribed to treat anxiety, sleeping problems, or seizure. Even medicines you take only occasionally could interact with the opioid pain medicine. Ask your health care provider about possible interactions.

How should I store my opioid medicine? If you have children at home — from a toddler to a teenager — consider a lockbox for your medications. Even one accidental dose of an opioid pain medicine meant for an adult can cause a fatal overdose in a child. Also, teenagers and others in the home or who are visiting may seek out opioid pain medicines for nonmedical use. They may look in bathroom medicine cabinets for a chance to steal these medicines.

What should I do with unused opioid medicine? Don't store it in case you have more pain later. Your leftover opioids can be targeted by people who you'd never expect to take it: friends, relatives, and even your kids and their friends. If there is no drug take-back program near you, FDA has created a list of opioid pain medicines we recommend you flush down the toilet when they're no longer needed. This way there can be no accidental exposures or mistakes in the home.

Can I share this medication with someone else? No. *Your* prescription is for *you*. Your doctor considers many factors when prescribing opioids. What's safe for you might lead to an overdose for someone else.

3. Can I have an Rx for naloxone?

You should discuss with your doctor whether you should also receive a prescription for naloxone, a drug that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose and could save lives. In many cases it makes sense to be prepared for potential problems by keeping naloxone in your home.

Play it safe. It doesn't matter who is writing the prescription, ask these questions before taking opioids.

► [Bring this opioid questions checklist to your doctor's office](#)

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