

# Why Are Opioids, Heroin, and Pain Medications Dangerous?

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Doctors use *opioid* pain medicines for pain relief. Opioids do not treat the cause of pain. Instead, they attach to *opioid receptors* in the body. These tell the brain to increase the production of a neurotransmitter that causes pleasure. This makes the person feel pleasure instead of pain.

## Types of opioids

Legal opioids include:

- Codeine (Tylenol 3, certain cough syrups)
- Hydrocodone (Vicodin®, Lortab)
- Oxycodone (Percocet, OxyContin®)
- Hydromorphone (Dilaudid)
- Morphine (MS Contin, MSIR)
- Fentanyl (Duragesic®)
- Methadone
- Buprenorphine (semisynthetic opioid)
- Propoxyphene (Darvocet, Darvon)

Illegal opioids are not used by doctors. People mostly use them for the “high” or good feelings they cause. Heroin and krokodil (desomorphine) are illegal opioids.

## Opioids for pain relief

Some pain is *acute*. It is short-term. It usually has a specific cause, like a broken bone or surgery. Some pain is *chronic*. It is long-term. It is often caused by a chronic illness or condition. Opioids are best used for acute pain. They can help people feel less pain while they heal. Doctors also use opioids for chronic pain. This can be risky. Causes of chronic pain do not often heal and go away. They keep making pain. This means using opioids for longer times. People who take opioids longer have higher risks of side effects and complications.

## Side effects

Opioids can be used safely as part of a pain management plan. But they can come with side effects, or unwanted symptoms. Constipation is the most common side effect. Others include:

- Sleepiness

- Nausea and vomiting
- Increased pain
- Muscle stiffness
- Itchiness

Another common side effect is trouble breathing. This is not only a dangerous short-term problem. Opioids cause less oxygen to reach the brain. This is called *hypoxia*. Over time, hypoxia can cause nerve issues, coma, or permanent brain damage.

Long-term use of opioids can lead to *tolerance* and *physical dependence*. Tolerance means you need more and more medicine to get the same pain relief. Plus, your body stops making a hormone that causes pleasure. This increases pain. Tolerance can make a “pain loop.” This means your body needs more and more medicine for similar pain control.

Physical dependence means your body gets used to the medicine and needs it to work well. Without it, you will experience withdrawal symptoms. These include:

- Agitation and distress
- Aches and pains
- Problems sleeping
- Sweating
- Tearing eyes and runny nose
- Stomach cramps and diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dilated pupils
- Fever

Long-term use of opioids can also lead to misuse or addiction.

Is physical dependence the same as addiction?

No. Physical dependence means your body needs the medicine. This happens with all sorts of medicines. Addiction is the misuse of a substance. It means you keep using something even when it causes problems in your life. You may have problems with work, school, or relationships. Misuse can cause emotional, behavioral, or physical problems. People sometimes mess up big parts of their lives just to keep getting and using opioids. Some signs of opioid misuse are:

- Taking more opioids than prescribed
- “Doctor shopping” or visiting multiple doctors for opioids
- Being obsessed with getting opioids
- Reckless actions to get opioids
- Looking for a “high,” not pain relief
- Missing work or school
- Personality changes
- Physical or behavioral health changes
- Relationship troubles

Research suggests that opioid addiction, or misuse, is a problem with no quick fix. In fact, the medical community views it as a long-term or chronic illness. As with all chronic illnesses,

treatments need to deal with all parts of opioid misuse. This includes medical, emotional, and behavioral parts.

“Abstinence-only” used to be the treatment for opioid use disorders, however, medication-assisted treatment (MAT) is now an evidenced-based best practice that helps many people. Examples of MAT are methadone or buprenorphine with Naloxone. Pregnant women should inform their prescribers before taking Naloxone or Suboxone. When someone is on MAT, he is not “using” one drug instead of another. When someone is on MAT he is in recovery, not still “using.” MAT is medicine, similar to how someone with diabetes might need to take insulin.

### **Risk factors for opioid misuse**

Anyone can become addicted to opioids. It is a major problem in the United States. More than 4 million people misuse opioids. However, some things increase a person’s risk, including:

- Chronic or long-term use
- Genetics
- Mixing alcohol or other substances with opioids
- Emotional or behavioral problems
- Personality

### **Dangers of illegal opioids**

All opioids can cause the side effects and risks discussed above. But illegal opioids have dangers all their own. Illegal opioids are dangerous because they are not regulated.

The production of legal opioids is highly controlled. In the United States, all drugs must be tested and approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The FDA controls how drugs are made. They check ingredients, doses, and quality. This lets doctors and people who use it know exactly what they are getting. Illegal opioids are not regulated. No one checks them to see if they are what they say they are. The doses may be high or low. They may have poisonous ingredients. These unknowns can lead to trouble, including overdose and death.

For example, heroin is a strong illegal opioid. It can be inhaled, smoked, or injected. It is usually mixed with other substances. This can include fentanyl, another strong opioid that has contributed to deaths. Heroin is not controlled. People do not know the strength of their heroin. A person never knows what their heroin is mixed with. If she gets pure heroin or heroin mixed with fentanyl, she can easily overdose.

Another example is krokodil (desomorphine). It is a very strong and dangerous street drug. It is even stronger than heroin. Years ago, the drug desomorphine was legal in Switzerland. Krokodil is a “street” version of desomorphine. It is made with codeine and “cooked” with other substances. Krokodil’s strength is not the only problem. It is also full of poisonous chemicals. Krokodil can damage a person’s veins, kidneys, or liver. It also causes skin infections, tooth loss, and problems with memory.

People sometimes buy oxycodone, fentanyl, or other legal opioids illegally. They often take more

than a doctor would prescribe. They also do not know if these drugs are real or fake.

## **Resources**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

[www.hhs.gov](http://www.hhs.gov)

(877) 696-6775

Narconon

[www.narconon.org](http://www.narconon.org)

(800) 775-8750

National Institute on Drug Abuse

[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

(301) 443-1124

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

(877) 726-4727

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