



Weaning off your pain medicine

UHN

Information for patients taking opioid pain medicines

Read this booklet to learn about:

- why you need to wean off your pain medicine
- how to wean off slowly
- how to control your pain
- what happens if you stop suddenly



After surgery, you may be taking opioid medicine to help you with pain. Opioid medicines are a stronger pain medicine that your doctor gives you a prescription for. Your pain should improve slowly over time.

As your pain gets better, you will need to wean off your opioid pain medicine. This means slowly reducing the amount you take until you are not taking it anymore. This is important because this kind of medicine can be addictive.

If you are not sure how to wean off your opioid medicine, talk to your family doctor. You can also talk to the doctor who prescribed the opioid medicine for you.

Please visit the UHN Patient Education website for more health information: www.uhnpatienteducation.ca
© 2015 University Health Network. All rights reserved.
This information is to be used for informational purposes only and is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Please consult your health care provider for advice about a specific medical condition. A single copy of these materials may be reprinted for non-commercial personal use only.

Author: Arlene Buzon-Tan RN(EC) & Susan Walker RN(EC)
Revised: 02/2015
Form: D-5932

How do I wean off?

Do not stop taking the opioid pain medicine right away. You should slowly reduce the amount you are taking until you are off the pain medicine.

You may be taking 2 kinds of medicine:

- a long acting (sustained release) pain medicine such as Hydromorph Contin®, OxyNEO®, or MS Contin®
- a short acting (immediate release) pain medicine such as oxycodone, hydromorphone, morphine, or codeine



Wean off the long acting medicine first.
Then wean off the short acting medicine.

How can I control the pain?

As you slowly reduce the opioids, you can use other medicines to help you control your pain. While you were in hospital, these medicines may have been ordered for you. Some examples are:

- drugs that prevent swelling like Ibuprofen (Advil®), Celecoxib (Celebrex®) or Meloxicam (Mobicox®). These drugs are called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). NSAIDs also have daily limits on the amount you can safely take.
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol®)
Taking too much Tylenol® may damage your liver. If you already have a problem with your liver, the total daily amount of Tylenol® you can safely take will need to be reduced.
- Percocet® tablets
Each Percocet® tablet has 5 milligrams of oxycodone and 325 milligrams of Tylenol®.

If you are taking Percocet®, limit the total amount of Tylenol you take. Ask your family doctor or pharmacist to help you with this.

Once you are off the opioids, you can wean off the other pain medicine. You can wean off more quickly, until you are not taking any more pain medicine.

How slowly should I wean off?

There is a Canadian guideline for using opioids safely.

If you have been taking this medicine for less than 1 month after surgery:

- Slowly wean off the pain medicine.
- See the examples below.

If you have been taking pain medicine for more than 1 month:

- Wean off the medicine more slowly.
- Speak with your family doctor or the doctor who orders your pain medicine. Your doctor can help you with this weaning process.
- See the examples below.

Do this to wean off long acting pain medicine:

Slowly reduce the dose you are taking. For example, you may take 1 less dose of the medicine every day. Do this over several days.

Your family doctor can help you cut down on the medicine. For example, if you are taking this medicine:

- 3 times per day, reduce to 2 times per day for 4 to 5 days
- 2 times per day, reduce to 1 time per day for 4 to 5 days
- 1 time per day, try stopping



Never cut, chew or crush this kind of medicine.

Do this to wean off short acting pain medicine:

1. When you start weaning off the medicine, increase the amount of time between doses. For example, if you are taking a dose every 4 hours, extend that time:
 - Take a dose every 5 to 6 hours for 1 or 2 days.
 - Then, take a dose every 7 to 8 hours for 1 or 2 days.
2. After step 1, start to reduce the dose. For example:
 - If you are taking 2 pills each time, start taking 1 pill each time. Do this for 1 to 2 days.
 - If you are taking 1 pill each time, cut the pill in half and take only half a pill each time. Do this for 1 to 2 days.



You may need to wean off opioid pain medicine faster than the above examples if:

- **the medicine is too strong for you (you feel sleepy)**
- **you have sleep apnea (you have short but repeated stops in your breathing during sleep)**

What happens if I stop suddenly?

If you stop your opioid medicine suddenly, you may have symptoms of withdrawal. These can be:

Physical (body) symptoms like:

- sweating
- fever
- shaking
- nausea (wanting to throw up)
- vomiting (throwing up)
- diarrhea
- more pain

Other symptoms like:

- cravings
- feeling tired and having trouble sleeping
- anxiety (worried all the time)
- feeling agitated or irritable (grouchy)
- aggression (feeling angry towards people)

These symptoms may start from 6 to 24 hours after taking your last dose of opioid pain medicine.

You can wait for the symptoms to pass over the next day or two. Or, you can speak with your family doctor or pharmacist. They can give you medicine to help control your symptoms of withdrawal.

Withdrawal symptoms are not a sign that you are addicted. They are a sign that your body is used to taking the opioid regularly and needs to wean off it slowly.

Opioid medicines are not usually addictive if you take them for pain. But, they can lead to addiction if you do not manage them carefully. So, it is important to wean yourself off these medicines as soon as possible.

To prevent addiction, you may need to stop taking the opioid medicine and accept a moderate amount of pain.

If you have trouble reducing your pain medicines, please contact your family doctor, surgeon, prescribing doctor or nurse practitioner for help.



Remember:

- **Do not drink alcohol while using opioid pain medicines**
- **Do not use sleeping pills or sedatives without talking to your doctor first.**

Notes:

Reviewed by: Dr. A. Bhatia and Dr. P. Tumber

Revised: February 2015

**Acute Pain Service, Department of Anesthesia
Toronto Western Hospital**