

MEDICATIONS

There is a lot of misinformation about prescription medication so it's not surprising 50% of Canadians with prescriptions don't take them properly. Sadly, this accounts for 50% of treatment failures. Separating fact from fiction can be tough.

THE THREE 3 PS OF PAIN MANAGEMENT

Pain management usually includes some combination of the following treatments:

- Physical treatments (e.g., heat/cold packs, rest, physiotherapy, movement)
- Psychological treatments (e.g., breathing exercises, meditation, counselling)
- Pharmacological treatments (e.g., over-the counter and prescription medication)

OPIOID PAIN MEDICATIONS

Opioids are one category of prescription pain medication. They work by decreasing your reaction to pain while increasing your ability to tolerate it.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DEPENDENCE, ADDICTION AND TOLERANCE

Physical dependence to a pain medication means a person's body has become used to how the medicine affects their pain. Physical dependence to opioid medications is common and can be easily managed by slowly reducing (tapering) the medication before discontinuing.

Many people who take opioid medications long term find that after a while they need more of the medication to achieve the same effect in reducing pain. This is called tolerance. Both physical dependence and tolerance are not addiction.

Addiction occurs when there is uncontrolled use of a substance, such as opioid medications, despite harmful consequences to the user and those around them. This uncontrolled use causes biochemical changes in the brain that further reinforce problematic use of the substance and related behavioural and/or personality changes. Opioid medications do carry a risk of addiction, but most people are able to use them safely under the care of their primary care provider. Your risk depends largely on your own personal risk factors (e.g., family history of substance use, a personal history of problematic alcohol and/or drug use, or certain mental health conditions).

WHEN SHOULD I STOP TAKING OPIOID PAIN MEDICATION?

- Never change or stop taking any opioid medication without first checking with your doctor.
- If a pain medication isn't working as well as it should, your doctor may switch you to a different dose or try another medication.
- If you feel ready to stop taking opioid medications, your doctor will likely wean you off them slowly to give your body time to adjust. Otherwise, you may experience withdrawal symptoms related to physical dependence.

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR MEDICATION

- Take your regular medication on time and as prescribed.
- Be prepared for breakthrough pain. Your doctor may give you a prescription for fast-acting medications to take for breakthrough pain.
- If you have medication for flare-ups or you have been told to take it as needed, don't wait until you cannot possibly bear the pain any longer before taking your medication.

HELP YOUR DOCTOR TO HELP YOU

- You are the expert on your body. Take responsibility for your care by making sure you understand your prescriptions and how to use them.
- Try to keep track of how your body responds to pain medication by monitoring their effect on your symptoms. Make note of any side-effects
- Keep track of the names and dose of your medications so you're prepared to communicate effectively about them with all of your health care team.

RESOURCES

- <https://www.webmd.com/pain-management/opioids-opiates-explained#1>
- <https://www.mayoclinic.org/chronic-pain-medication-decisions/art-20360371>
- <https://www.liveplanbe.ca/pain-education/medications>