Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Opioid Misuse: Understanding Your Risk

This information will help you understand and prevent opioid misuse.

About opioids

Opioids are strong painkillers prescribed to help with moderate to severe pain. They're also called narcotics. Opioids can be used to help manage your pain when other painkillers don't help. To learn more about opioids, read *Safe Opioid Use: What You Need to Know* (www.mskcc.org/pe/opioids).

About opioid misuse

It's important to follow your healthcare provider's instructions when taking opioids. Opioid misuse is taking opioids in a different way than your healthcare provider told you to. People misuse opioids in different ways including:

- Taking a different amount or dose of opioids than prescribed.
- Taking someone else's opioids.
- Taking opioids when they don't need to.

Everyone has some risk of misusing opioids, but some people have a higher risk than others. You're at a higher risk of opioid misuse when:

- You first start taking opioids.
- Your dose is increased.
- You're also taking sleep or anxiety medicine.
- You're using alcohol.

How we will keep you safe while taking opioids

At MSK, we talk with everyone about their drug and alcohol use at the start of their treatment with us. This helps us understand if you're at risk for opioid misuse and how we can help you manage your pain.

If you're at risk for opioid misuse, we will work with you to make sure you're taking your opioids safely during your treatment at MSK. While managing your pain with opioids, we may:

- Limit the number of pills you're prescribed.
- Have follow-up visits with you more often.
- Ask you for a urine (pee) drug screening.

How you can take opioids safely

It's important to follow your healthcare provider's instructions when taking opioids. Here are some tips for taking opioids safely.

- **Be honest with your healthcare providers.** Tell your healthcare providers about what recreational drugs you use. This way, they can keep you safe while they help you manage your pain.
- **Tell us about your pain.** Talk with your healthcare providers about your pain and how you manage it.
- Tell your healthcare providers if you're worried that you will misuse your medicine.
- **Take opioids as prescribed.** Follow your healthcare provider's instructions when taking opioids. Don't take more opioids than your healthcare provider told you to take.
- **Make a list of all your medicine.** This includes all opioids, other medicine, and dietary supplements (such as herbs, vitamins, or home remedies) that you're taking. Write down the names, dose amounts, and how often you take them. Bring this list with you to all your appointments.
- **Store opioids safely.** Keep your opioids in a safe place, such as in a locked

cabinet. Make sure they are stored away from others, including visitors, children, friends, family, and pets.

- **If you don't need them, don't keep them.** Get rid of your unused or expired opioids when you don't need them anymore. This can help you make sure you don't take more than you need. It also stops someone else from taking them. To learn more, read *How to Get Rid of Unused Medicine* (www.mskcc.org/pe/get-rid-unused-medicine).
- **Only take opioids prescribed to you.** Don't share your opioids with another person or take another person's opioids.
- **Don't drive, drink alcohol, or use recreational drugs while taking opioids.** Opioids can make you drowsy and less alert. Alcohol and recreational drugs can make the drowsiness worse.
- **Talk with your healthcare provider about changing your dose.** Stopping opioids suddenly can cause you to have side effects from medicine withdrawal. This doesn't mean you're addicted. It's a normal reaction when you stop taking medicine too quickly. If you want to increase, decrease, or stop taking opioids, ask your healthcare provider how to do it safely.

About naloxone (Narcan®)

If prescribed opioids, you may also get a prescription for naloxone (Narcan). This emergency medicine can reverse or block an opioid overdose if you take more opioids than we prescribe you. To learn more, read *About Naloxone (Narcan®)* (www.mskcc.org/pe/naloxone). If you get naloxone, your healthcare provider will show you how to use it.

Always call 911 after using naloxone. Its effects only last 30 to 90 minutes, and you may need more medical care.

If you're unsure if you should use naloxone, call 911, and follow the operator's instructions.

If you have trouble breathing or become unconscious, someone must call 911 right away.

More resources about opioids

Center for Disease Control (CDC)
www.cdc.gov/opiods
Visit the CDC's website to learn more about opioids.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
800-662-HELP (800-662-4357)
www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline
SAMHSA's National Helpline is a free, confidential referral and information phone service. It's for people facing mental or substance use disorders and their families. The Helpline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's available in English and Spanish.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Opioid Misuse: Understanding Your Risk - Last updated on July 16, 2026
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