



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Opioid Misuse: Understanding Your Risk

This information will help you understand and prevent opioid misuse.

About Opioids

Opioids (also called narcotics) are strong painkillers that your healthcare provider (such as your doctor or advanced practice provider) prescribes to you for moderate to severe pain. They can be used to help manage your pain when other painkillers don't help. For more information about opioids, read our resource *Opioids: 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. Taking opioids differently than how your healthcare provider tells you to take them is called opioid misuse. 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 medications
- You're using alcohol

What We Will Do

At Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK), we talk with all patients about their drug and alcohol use at the beginning 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 and taking opioids during your treatment at MSK, we will work together to make sure you're taking your opioids safely. 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

What You Can Do

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 about drugs you use.
- 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 medications.
- **Take them as prescribed.** Follow your healthcare provider's instructions when taking opioids. Don't take your opioids in greater amounts, or more often than as told by your healthcare provider.
- **Make a list of all your medications.** This includes all opioids, other medications, dietary supplements (such as herbs, vitamins, or home remedies) that you're taking. Keeping track of names and doses is important. Bring this list with you to all your appointments.

- **Store them safely.** Keep your opioids in a safe place (such as in a locked cabinet) and out of reach of others, including visitors, children, friends, and family.
- **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 to and lowers the chances that someone else might take them. For more information, read our resource *Getting Rid of Unused Medications* (www.mskcc.org/pe/getting_rid_medications).
- **Only take yours.** Don't share your opioids with another person or take another person's opioids.
- **Don't drive or drink alcohol while taking opioids.** Opioids can make you drowsy and less alert. Alcohol can make the drowsiness worse.
- **Talk to your healthcare provider about changing your dose.** If you want to increase, decrease, or stop taking opioids, ask your healthcare provider how to do it safely.

Resources

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 for people facing mental or substance use disorders and their families. The Helpline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and is available in English and Spanish.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly.
If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM,
during the weekend, or on a holiday, 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 May 6, 2021

All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center