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## Will I become addicted to morphine (or other strong pain medicines)?

People with cancer rarely become addicted to powerful pain medications such as opioids when they are prescribed for cancer-related pain. The word “addiction” is widely misunderstood. Pain specialists view addiction as a series of specific behaviors. These actions involve compulsive use of medication, loss of control over medications, and insistence on taking medication despite deterioration in the quality of life. People usually become physically dependent on pain medication after taking opioids for more than 24 hours. Physical dependence is a normal part of proper pain treatment. Doctors and nurses slowly taper pain medication over time. This ensures that no one experiences severe withdrawal symptoms due to physical dependence. The risk of psychological dependence on pain medication is low with well-managed treatment. People with cancer very rarely seek drugs beyond what is needed to control pain.

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## What should I know about pain medication side effects?

The side effects of opioids and other pain medications have been well studied and can be managed effectively. [Learn more about managing the side effects of pain medicine, cancer and its treatment.](#)

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## If I take strong pain medicines such as opioids early on, will I run out of options if my pain gets worse later?

Depending on the person, opioids may be prescribed at any stage of treatment. There is no need to tough it out early in treatment. People starting a therapy for cancer do not need to be concerned that strong pain medicines won't be effective if needed later on. Some people, but not all, develop a drug tolerance. That means their body has become accustomed to the medication. When a medication doesn't relieve pain as well as it once did, the dose can be adjusted. Another type of medication or treatment can also be prescribed. People may receive increasing doses of opioids for years without becoming addicted or psychologically dependent. When the need for pain relief subsides, physical dependence can usually be managed without withdrawal symptoms by tapering the opioid before discontinuing it.

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