

# Women and Prescription Opioids

## Prescription Opioids

- Opioids are a type of medication often prescribed to treat acute and chronic pain.
- Opioids are drugs that are made from the opium poppy plant or made in a lab from chemicals.
- Some common opioid medications include morphine, codeine, oxycodone (e.g., Oxycontin®, Percodan® or Percocet®), hydrocodone (e.g., Hycodan®, Tussionex®), hydromorphone (e.g., Dilaudid®), fentanyl, methadone, and buprenorphine.
- Prescription opioid medications come in various forms—tablets, capsules, syrups, solutions, patches, and suppositories.
- Opioids can be very effective in reducing pain. They can also produce a feeling of well-being or euphoria (“high”).
- Opioid medications can be dangerous at high doses as they can cause drowsiness, slow your breathing, and lead to a coma and death.

## Prescription Opioids and Your Health

- Side effects of prescription opioids can include sedation (feeling drowsy or sleepy), nausea, vomiting, and constipation. You can also build a tolerance to these drugs and may require higher amounts to manage your pain.
- If you suddenly stop or decrease the amount of medication you are taking, you may experience physical symptoms of withdrawal. These symptoms usually last a few days to a week.
- Opioids are depressant drugs which means that they slow down the part of the brain that controls breathing. All opioid drugs are dangerous when taken in large quantities or when taken with other drugs that are depressants, such as alcohol and benzodiazepines, such as clonazepam (Rivotril®) and lorazepam (Ativan®).
- Prescription opioid medications can be dangerous when misused. Misusing can occur when you:
  - Use opioids with alcohol or other medications with sedative effects
  - Take more medication than prescribed for you
  - Change how your medication is taken (e.g., snorting or injecting)
  - Take medication that was not prescribed for you
  - Long-term use of prescription opioid medications in women can cause hormonal changes, infertility, anxiety and depression. Changes in your hormones may affect your period and interest in sex. Long-term, frequent use of opioids to treat headaches can result in “medication overuse headache”, a rebound headache caused by excessive use of headache relief medications

- Serious harms from prescription opioid medications can include physical dependence (addiction), overdose, and death. When caught early, an overdose may be treated with drugs such as naloxone. Naloxone reverses opioid overdoses temporarily allowing for additional time to get help.

## Prescription Opioids and Pregnancy

- Using prescription opioid medications during pregnancy can have risks. If you could become pregnant, are thinking about getting pregnant or as soon as you are aware that you are pregnant, it is important to talk to your health care provider.
- Taking opioids during pregnancy can increase the chance that your baby will be born too early or experience symptoms of withdrawal from the medications you are taking.
- If your baby experiences symptoms of withdrawal, he or she will need medical observation and possibly treatment. Not all babies will experience withdrawal and not all require medical treatment for it. Most babies who experience symptoms of withdrawal will have no long-term effects on their health and development.
- Scientists are still learning about the overall safety of using long-term opioids during pregnancy. Some opioids in certain doses may cause birth defects such as problems with the baby’s heart or brain and spine (neural tube defects).
- Depending on your situation, you may want to discuss alternate forms of pain management with your health care provider.
- You should not decide to stop taking opioids on your own or go “cold turkey” as stopping their use can cause harms during pregnancy such as early labour or making it difficult for the fetus to get enough oxygen.
- If you have an addiction to opioids, it is recommended that you take methadone or buprenorphine under the care of your healthcare provider during pregnancy as these medications are less risky for you and your fetus.
- If you think you might be dependent or addicted to prescription opioid medications, talk to your health care provider about support and services in your community that can help you.



## Prescription Opioids and Breastfeeding

- It is safe to breastfeed while taking most prescription opioid medications, but it is important to talk to your health care provider about your particular situation.
- The length of time you've been taking the medications, whether you were taking them during pregnancy, and the dose or amount of the medication can help you and your health care provider make a decision.
- In general, if you are prescribed medications for short-term pain relief, this should not affect your ability to breastfeed.
- If you are taking methadone or buprenorphine as prescribed, you can breastfeed regardless of the amount you are taking. While small amounts of methadone and buprenorphine pass into breast milk, this has little effect on your baby. If your medication dose is stable, you should be able to breastfeed unless you have other health concerns.
- If you are taking medications such as codeine or hydrocodone, talk to your health care provider. Scientists are still learning about the safety of breastfeeding when women take prescription opioid medications for long periods of time and at higher amounts. Even small amounts of codeine can be concerning for some women depending on how their bodies' metabolize it.
- Some opioid medications can make you sleepy. If you notice that your baby appears sleepy, talk to your health care provider about the amount and how often you are taking your medication and whether any changes need to be made.

## Prescription Opioids and Parenting

- Some types of opioid medications can make people feel very drowsy and can make them sleep more deeply than usual.
- Just like other prescription drugs, keep opioid medications in a safe place where your children (and pets) cannot reach them. Avoid leaving them on the counter or in a purse. Fentanyl patches, which are worn for 72 hours, can be especially dangerous. Avoid throwing used patches in the garbage where your child could find them later.
- If your child accidentally ingests your medication, seek medical attention right away.
- Older children and teenagers may be interested in taking prescription opioid medications for recreational reasons. Talk to them openly about the risks of these medications. You can be a good role model by taking your medication as prescribed, keeping them safe, and not sharing them with others.
- You can return any unused opioid pain medications to the pharmacy for safe disposal. This also helps the environment.

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