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Know Your Meds

There are more and more cases of death caused by overdoses of opioid painkillers. We hear about the celebrities who have died prematurely do to prescription drug overdoses or others who have been arrested for illegal behavior that was influenced by prescription drugs with many of those drugs coming from opioid pain killers.

Opioids are natural or synthetic chemicals that reduce feelings of pain. This family of prescription medication has led to an epidemic of overdoses and addictions in the United States. An article in the June 2016 Consumer Reports states that more than 14,000 Americans died from overdoses involving prescription opioids in 2014 based on information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and more than 1,000 people are treated in emergency rooms across the U.S. each day for misusing these types of drugs.

Consumer Reports also shares that Americans spend \$300 billion on pain treatments and care each year. That does not include the cost of loss of productivity from employees who are using these medications. In 2011, the Institute of Medicine reported that the loss of productivity runs about \$315 billion annually.

Why such a prevalent use of opioids? Pain. Patients who complain of persistent, chronic, and prolonged pain are often cause for a physician to prescribing an opioid. To anyone who has experienced this kind of pain, you know it can be very frustrating, to say the least. The pain peaks at inopportune times, it affects your ability to concentrate and reduces your energy level significantly. It can disappear unexpectedly and just as quickly reappear with a vengeance. In some situations, the cause is clear – an injury or arthritis – while in other cases, the source seems to evade all the medical tests. When you are in chronic pain (pain that continues in excess of 3 months or past the time of normal tissue healing), it's natural to seek out treatments and medications that will make the pain go away.

However, the practice of taking opioids to control pain has become alarmingly prevalent and the statistics on death, addiction, and overuse are staggering:

- From 1999 to 2014, over 165,000 people died from overdose related to prescription opioids.
- An estimated 1 in 5 patients with non-cancer pain or pain-related diagnosis are prescribed opioids.
- Nearly 2 million Americans abused or were dependent on prescription opioids in 2014.

- As many as 1 in 4 people receiving prescription opioids long term in a primary care setting struggle with addiction.

As a result, the CDC has issued its first-ever guideline for prescribing opioids for chronic pain. In March, 2016 the agency released information advising to first try nondrug treatments or use medications other than opioids for people with chronic pain. The guideline is not intended for patients who are in active cancer treatment, palliative care, or end-of-life care.



Learn about the risks of  
prescription opioids  
[www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose](http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose)



What does the CDC suggest a patient (i.e. consumer) know about opioids and their use?

- Determine if your pain medication is an opioid. The CDC identifies hydrocodone (Vicodin), oxycodone (OxyContin), oxymorphone (Opana), methadone, and fentanyl as common opioid pain relievers.
- Prescription opioids can help with some types of pain in the short term but have serious risks. Being aware of the potential risks by asking your physician questions and accurately relaying your pain level to them is information that is instrumental to your decision to take opioids.
- These medications are commonly used to relieve pain for patients who are suffering with active cancer or others in hospice. Discuss pain treatment options openly with your doctor. Be candid about any previous or current addiction issues you have been faced with. Make sure you are clear about the benefits and risks of taking these types of medication.
- Besides risk of addiction and overdose, these pain relievers have other side effects including nausea, constipation, and sleepiness or dizziness, just to name a few.
- If prescribed opioids, **use them only as instructed** by your doctor. Never take more than you are supposed to and never increase the frequency at which you are supposed to take them.
- Avoid the use of alcohol, benzodiazepines, muscle relaxants, hypnotics, or other prescription opioid medication when you are prescribed these medicines.

Being informed about ANY medication you are taking is an important part of your overall care. The primary care physician wants to make sure you are fully aware of the effects medication can have on your body. Together, you and your physician can create a plan that works for your pain level while minimizing the long-term effects some medications have.

You may be wondering why a Family and Consumer Science Extension agent is writing about opioids and their benefits and risks. Chronic pain does not just impact your health. It also impacts your overall wellness and those who work and live with you.

Remember, the medications you take, especially opioid pain relievers, can affect all parts of your life – health, family, and finances. The longer you take these types of medications, the greater the impact they may have on your own body, as well as the relationships with others around you. Talk to your doctor about how you can manage your pain while minimizing the impact this type of treatment could have on your lifestyle. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!