Long-Term Opioid Treatment

What is an opioid?

An opioid is a medicine that helps with pain. It reduces the pain signals that reach your brain. Types of opioid pain medicine include:

- Hydrocodone (Vicodin, Norco)
- Oxycodone (OxyContin, Percocet)
- Hydromorphone (Dilaudid, Exalgo)
- Oxymorphone (Opana)
- Morphine (MSContin, MSIR, Roxanol)
- Methadone
- Fentanyl (Duragesic)
- Tramadol (Ultram)
- Buprenorphine (Butrans, Belbuca)

How do I know if my opioid medicine is working?

Opioids will not take your pain away completely. The goal of opioid treatment is to help you be as active as possible by decreasing your pain. If you take too much opioid medicine, it may be hard to do your daily activities, because you feel sleepy or less motivated to do things. If you find you are unable to do your normal activities when you take opioids, your health care provider may change your opioid dose and talk with you about other ways to help treat your pain.
Are there long-term effects with opioid use?
There are some risks and long-term side effects from taking opioids. These may include:

- Lower sex drive
- Loss of bone mass
- Depression due to hormonal issues
- Changes in your thyroid
- Increased pain
- Increased risks if you become pregnant
- Withdrawal, if you stop the medicine too quickly
- Addiction (a small number of people taking opioids may become addicted to this type of medicine, even if it is given to treat pain)

What is the difference between withdrawal and addiction to opioids?
If you use opioids more than a few weeks, you may feel sick if you stop using them too quickly. These are withdrawal symptoms. This is not the same as being addicted.

If you have a history of alcohol or drug abuse, you may be more likely to become addicted to opioids. It is important to tell your health care provider if you have a history of drug and alcohol abuse or any of the following problems because they may be a sign of an addiction:

- Trouble controlling your use of opioids
- A craving for the drug
- Use of opioid medicine to treat problems other than pain, such as feeling nervous or sad

What should I do if I want to decrease or stop taking my opioid medicine?
It is important to talk to your health care provider before you stop taking this medicine. **If you stop taking this medicine too quickly**, you may have symptoms of opioid withdrawal. Your health care provider will work with you to create a plan to lower your dose, or to help you stop taking opioids.

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Call your health care provider if you have any symptoms of opioid withdrawal. These symptoms may include:

- Runny nose
- Yawning
- Goose bumps
- Stomach cramps
- Diarrhea
- Throwing up
- Feeling anxious or angry
- Achy muscles

Are there other ways to treat my pain?

It may help to use several treatments together to control your pain. These combined treatments can help reduce stress, inactivity, uncertainty and feelings of powerlessness, boredom, fear, or anger. These combined treatments may include:

- **Non-Drug Pain Relief Therapies:** heat or cold packs, physical or occupational therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy with a trained counselor, surgery, nerve stimulation, counseling
- **Integrative Medicine:** acupuncture, chiropractic care, relaxation training, massage
- **Exercise:** stretching, weight loss, physical rehabilitation
- **Other medicines:** another type of oral medicine, injections

Talk with a member of your health care team for more information about these ways to treat pain.