



Consequences of prescription drug use

The effects of using and misusing prescription pain medications can impact not only the patient, but also family members, friends, coworkers and even the broader community.

Physical dependence on opioid medication occurs as the body adapts to long-term exposure to the drug.

Typically an opioid addiction will gradually overpower the abusing individual's otherwise logical thinking.

Side effects

The use of opioids for pain relief can have side effects including:

- drowsiness
- constipation
- depressed breathing
- drowsiness
- dizziness and nausea

Ongoing effects can include tolerance and physical dependence on the drugs (see below). Particularly when first starting the medication, it is important not to drive or use any machinery that may cause injury.

It is also important not to mix opioids with:

- alcohol
- antihistamines
- barbiturates
- benzodiazepines

All of these substances slow breathing, which could lead to life-threatening respiratory depression.

Withdrawal and dependence

Individuals using opioid pain medications can become dependent on the drugs. A person who takes opioids can become tolerant to them; this means that more of the drug is needed to obtain its effects. So, users may feel sick if there are no opioids in the body because the drug has been abruptly stopped—this is known as withdrawal.

Symptoms of withdrawal can include:

- nausea
- diarrhea
- vomiting
- sleeplessness
- restlessness
- tremors
- abdominal cramps
- bone and muscle aches
- drug cravings

Opioid withdrawal syndrome is intensely unpleasant, and people will go to great lengths to avoid it. Withdrawal can usually be managed medically or avoided by using a slow tapering off of the drug use, under a doctor's care.

Addiction

Two major signs of opioid addiction are craving, wherein the mind develops an overwhelming desire for the drug; and loss of control, wherein it has become harder to say no to using the drug. Use is compulsive and continues even when it causes harm to the individual. By the time use of prescription painkillers reaches the stage of true addiction, it has taken over virtually all aspects of the user's life and has adversely impacted everyone around the user. Finding and using the drugs has become the user's primary focus; all other daily routines and responsibilities become secondary to fulfilling the need for the drug. Some people are at higher risk of addiction because of their genes, temperament, or personal situation.

The physical effects of an opioid addiction can be devastating. Some of the most common effects on individuals abusing opioids include:

- Bleeding ulcers
- Liver damage
- Kidney damage
- Damage to major organs
- Reduced lung function, shortness of breath
- Seizures
- Damage to brain structure and functioning
- Damage to memory formation
- Overdose

- Seizures
- Coma
- Death

Overdose

Prescription drugs, especially opioid analgesics, have been increasingly involved in overdose deaths throughout the last decade. Opioid-related overdose deaths now outnumber overdose deaths involving all illicit drugs such as heroin and cocaine combined.

An individual suffering an opioid overdose will have symptoms including:

- decreased level of consciousness
- extreme fatigue
- pinpoint pupils
- slowed heart rate
- slowed breathing
- Blue lips and nails
- seizures and muscle spasms
- unresponsive to voice or physical attempts to wake up

The severity of the symptoms will depend on how much of the drug has been taken. Taking too much of the drug can cause severe respiratory issues or even death.

Severe opioid overdoses require emergency medical management to treat respiratory depression with naloxone or similar opioid overdose medications. Naloxone is effective in treating acute overdose, and is considered the preferred treatment for this condition. In 2014 the FDA approved an injectable form of naloxone for home use by family

members or caregivers of people who have overdosed on opioids. For nearly 20 years, community-based programs have been offering naloxone and accompanying services to those who abuse opioids.

Psychosocial problems

Typically, an opioid addiction will gradually overpower the abusing individual's otherwise logical thinking. Difficulties that people addicted to opioids experience can be severe and farreaching:

- Loss of self-esteem and self-worth
- Loss of productive motivation
- Loss of employment
- Divorce
- Domestic abuse
- Child abuse
- Homelessness
- Loss of trust of family members and friends
- Financial ruin
- Incarceration

The costs to the individual, family, employer and the community add up quickly in the form of drug-related crime, criminal justice costs, treatment costs, child welfare and public safety.

Additional resources

National Institute on Drug Abuse

www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/prescription-drugs/opioids/what-are-opioids

Family Doctor

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/opioid-addiction.html>

Drugfree.org

www.drugfree.org

Contact Us

Your program provides access to tools and other resources online or call us directly to speak to a professional counselor who is available everyday and at any time to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.

This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here