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If you have moderate to severe pain, you may be prescribed Percocet. Percocet is a high alert medication, which means if you do not take it exactly as prescribed it may cause illness or injury.

To understand how Percocet works, let's look at how pain affects your body.

Thousands of tiny nerve cells in your body sense many feelings, like cold, heat, pressure, and pain. When your body is injured, the tiny nerve cells send a message to your brain that says, "I'm in pain here!"

Percocet is a combination of two different pain relief medications – oxycodone and acetaminophen, and comes in a tablet. It works in two ways to help relieve pain. One part of Percocet blocks pain signals to the brain. The other part changes the way your body thinks of pain.

When you are prescribed Percocet, the medication label will show two dosage numbers. The first is the amount of oxycodone and the second is the amount of acetaminophen prescribed to you. Your healthcare provider will decide how much of each ingredient you need to take.

Percocet is a powerful medication. Some people should not take it. Do not take Percocet if you are allergic to acetaminophen, commonly called Tylenol®, codeine or morphine.

If you have asthma or COPD tell your healthcare provider. If you are pregnant, planning to get pregnant or are breastfeeding, talk to your healthcare provider before taking Percocet. Before taking Percocet, tell your healthcare provider if you have a history of head injury and stroke; liver, kidney or thyroid problems; and pancreas problems.

Percocet can be highly addictive. If you have a history of abuse of street drugs or prescription medications, tell your healthcare provider. If you drink more than 3 alcoholic drinks per day, or have a history of alcohol abuse, you may not be able to take Percocet.

Some side effects of Percocet include: constipation, nausea, headache, dizziness, sleepiness. If you do notice any of these side effects, contact your healthcare provider about how to manage them.

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Be aware that you are at an increased risk of falling while taking Percocet. Get up from a sitting or lying position slowly. Do not drive or operate heavy machinery, including your car, until you know how Percocet affects you.

Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist before taking any other product with acetaminophen in it, or any cold, sleep, pain or allergy medication. If you have trouble breathing, shortness of breath, fast heartbeat, chest pain, swelling in your face or throat, or extreme tiredness, call 911 and get help immediately.

This is not the complete list of side effects. Make sure you discuss all possible side effects with your healthcare provider.

Take Percocet exactly as prescribed. Do not change your dose.

Always swallow the pill whole with plenty of water. Drink 6 to 8 glasses of water a day to avoid constipation.

Percocet is taken when needed so you may not be on a dosing schedule. If you do take it regularly and skip a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If it's almost time for your next dose, skip your missed dose and return to your normal medication schedule.

Do not double dose. If you think you have taken too much Percocet, call 911. An overdose of Percocet can cause serious breathing problems that can lead to death.

Store Percocet away from moisture and direct sunlight. Your bathroom medicine cabinet is not the best place because of moisture. Do not leave your pills where they can get too hot or too cold.

Always store your medication out of sight and out of reach of children to prevent accidents. Because Percocet is a narcotic that can cause dependency, it can be a very desirable drug to addicts. Lock this medication up to prevent stealing and abuse.

When you are done taking Percocet, crush all of your remaining pills and mix them with undesirable trash, like kitty litter or coffee grounds. Do not sell or give your Percocet to anyone else. It's against the law and can seriously harm anyone else taking it. Contact your local police station for more information on proper disposal directions.

Percocet can help relieve your pain, but it's a powerful medication that should only be taken exactly as prescribed. If you have any questions about Percocet, ask your healthcare provider and pharmacist for more information.