

Safe Use of Opioids

I was very worried about being addicted to the narcotic pain medication.

With two surgeries back-to-back, first for a knee and then for an elbow, David Toy knows about intense pain. His doctor prescribed opioids to help with that.

Having the pain medication helped to kind of offset some of that, some of that really high pain that I was having. But then after the few days I just wanted not to have that effect that I was feeling very loopy and feeling somewhat out of it with the narcotic pain medication.

Considering the potentially addictive nature of narcotic pain medications or opioids, it's not unusual for patients to be concerned about taking them. But medical experts say they can be used safely, if they are prescribed in small doses for short periods of time.

If you use narcotics how they're intended to be used in the short term, again, for that post-operative pain, it's very rare that you will develop addiction.

Many patients have fear of opioids because 'oh my goodness, if you give me these, I'll get hooked.' And if you don't have addiction, a several days supply of opioids in a dental or surgical situation or after an emergency room visit is perfectly fine. Nobody's going to get addicted.

There are some possible side effects from taking opioids. These include extreme tiredness or low blood pressure, trouble breathing, nausea, confusion, itching or hives, constipation. The risk of addiction is very low when opioids are given for a short time to relieve acute pain. Still, experts warn they are a very potent medication that can be abused. So, it's important to make sure you store them and dispose of any unused pills safely.

Don't keep extras around the house; if they have to be in the house keep them locked up. And when you're done, take them to the med drop. Dispose of them safely because extra opioid supplies in the home are a vehicle not only for addiction but for overdose deaths in kids and people of all ages.

To find a safe place to get rid of opioids you no longer need, check the internet for medication disposal sites in your area. The reason opioids are often prescribed is fairly simple. By reducing pain from an injury or surgery, a patient can more quickly get back to their usual activities.

It's just if it's not monitored properly that's when it becomes a problem. That's why I think it's important to ask questions with your doctor...what is my risk factor? Why am I being given this? Are there other alternatives? Regular follow-ups with your doctor will also help ensure that you are not becoming too reliant on the opioids. Your doctor should monitor your pain level which should improve as you heal, allowing the doctor to lower your dose or even switch you to some non-opioid alternative.

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Especially with narcotic medication they would check up and make sure I wasn't, you know, abusing it, that I was taking it for pain. But at the same time, even with reassurance from the doctors for me, I was very concerned. Very concerned to the point where I know I would voice that with my doctor and the doctor listened very intently with what my concerns were and understood.

If you or your doctor are concerned about your use of opioids for pain management, there are other options that may work even better for you with fewer risks or side effects. These could include: Acetaminophen (such as Tylenol), aspirin or ibuprofen (like Advil), Behavioral therapy to learn how to respond to pain triggers, Exercise and weight loss, Medications if you are depressed by the pain, Acupuncture, or Massage.

The bottom line is as a patient, you owe it to yourself to get the safest, most effective pain relief possible. Opioids, when taken as prescribed and monitored by your doctor can be a safe part of your pain management plan.