The Risks of Long-Term Use of Opioids

Arkansas Blue MEDICARE
An Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association



Prescription opioids can be used to help relieve moderate-to-severe pain. They are usually prescribed:

- After surgery or injury.
- For certain health conditions.

While opioids are an important part of treatment, they have serious risks:

- Addiction
- Accidental overdose
- Death

The long-term use of opioids can also lead to tolerance (needing more of the medication for the same pain relief) and physical dependence (having symptoms of withdrawal when a medication is stopped). Even when taken as directed, the use of prescription opioids can have several side effects:

- Constipation
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dry mouth
- Sleepiness
- Dizziness, confusion, depression, and irritability
- Itching
- Difficulty breathing

It's important to work with your provider/prescriber to make sure you are getting the safest, most effective care. You might be able to take other medications or do other things to help manage your pain with less long-term risk.

What should you do?

1. Talk with your provider/prescriber about ways to manage your pain without taking prescription opioids. Some of these options may work better. And they may have fewer risks and side effects.
2. Learn about your treatment choices and the risks.

What treatment options don't use opioids?

- Over-the-counter medications like Tylenol® (acetaminophen), Advil® (ibuprofen), and Aleve® (naproxen)
- Non-opioid prescriptions such as lidocaine and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- Physical therapy and exercise
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Some medications that are also used for depression or seizures

How to protect against overdose risk if opioid use is continued long-term

Talk with your provider/prescriber about getting a prescription for an opioid rescue medication. Naloxone and other opioid rescue medications can be given during an opioid overdose. They may also reverse the effects. During an opioid overdose, these rescue medications could save your life.

Naloxone and other opioid rescue medications are available by prescription or over the counter.

What is medication-assisted treatment (MAT)?

Medication-assisted treatment (MAT) is the use of medications along with counseling and behavioral therapies. It helps with the treatment of opioid use disorders (OUD). It also helps some people to stay in recovery. There are three drugs approved by the FDA for the treatment of opioid dependence. These have been proven safe and effective when used with counseling and psycho-social support. They are:

- Buprenorphine
- Methadone
- Naltrexone



What non-opioid treatments are covered by Arkansas Blue Medicare?

- Arkansas Blue Medicare's Medicare Advantage plans (HMO and PFFS) cover the following alternative treatments that help with pain management:
  - Acupuncture for chronic low back pain
  - Alcohol misuse screenings and counseling
  - Behavioral health integration services
  - Chronic pain management and treatment services
  - Depression screenings
  - Medicare-covered chiropractic services
  - Mental health and substance disorder services
  - Non-opioid prescriptions (e.g., lidocaine and NSAIDs) and prescription drugs used for depression or seizures
  - Occupational therapy
  - OUD treatment services
  - Physical therapy
  - Quarterly over-the-counter (OTC) allowance (to buy Tylenol, Advil, or Aleve)

- Arkansas Blue Medicare's prescription drug plans (PDPs) cover the following non-opioid treatments that help with pain management:
  - Non-opioid prescriptions (e.g., lidocaine and NSAIDs) and prescription drugs used for depression or seizures
  - The medical services listed above would be covered by Original Medicare (if this is how you get your Medicare-covered healthcare services)

See our Evidence of Coverage (EOC) and/or Drug List by plan to get cost sharing information.

Where can I learn more?

- Visit www.hhs.gov/opioids for information on state and federal public health resources about opioid medications and how to safely use them
- Go to www.medicare.gov/coverage/pain-management to learn about pain management treatment covered by Medicare



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