

Tapering Opioid Pain Medicine

Fact Sheet for Patients and Families

What is tapering?

Tapering means slowly lowering your dose of a medicine. If you are taking opioid medicine to manage severe, long-term (chronic) pain, you can make a plan with your prescribing provider to taper. Some common examples of opioids include Norco, Percocet, Morphine, Fentanyl, and Methadone.

Tapering can mean:

- Taking less opioid medicine, or
- Slowly lowering your dose until you stop the medicine altogether.

Either way, tapering can reduce your risks and side effects, improve your pain, and improve your life.

Why taper opioid medicine?

Opioids may not be that helpful for chronic pain and may even make it worse. They work better for short-term pain.

Opioids have serious risks and side effects. These can include:

- Decreased breathing, which can cause sudden death. In 2016, more than 46 people in the U.S. died every day from overdoses involving prescription opioids.
- Tolerance, which means you need more and more of the medicine to get the same level of pain control.
- Physical dependence, which means having withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking opioids.
- Addiction.
- Becoming more sensitive to pain over time.
- In pregnancy, harming your unborn child.
- Accidents, such as falls and vehicle crashes.
- Greater risk of constipation, depression, or increasing disability.

What do I need to do?

- ① Talk with your provider about how tapering your opioid dose could help you.
- ② Make a plan with your provider for how you will taper and manage your pain in other ways.
- ③ Keep all appointments with your prescribing provider. Call if you need help.

- Greater risk of getting infections and more trouble getting over them.
- Impacts to your hormones, leading to multiple issues including sexual side effects.

Tapering to a lower dose can reduce your risks and side effects. The only way to have no risk is to stop taking opioids. Even if you don't stop, though, lowering your dose can reduce your risk. Tapering has been shown to lower risk of:

- Death, overdose, addiction, and suicide.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Accidents such as vehicle crashes.
- Breaking a bone (fracture).

When you taper your opioid dose, your everyday life may also improve. People who taper their opioid dose report having:

- More energy for exercise, work, and other activities.
- Clearer thinking.
- Better relationships with family and friends.
- Less constipation.

Circle the items on this page that describe **your** reasons for wanting to taper your opioid dose.

Tapering Opioid Pain Medicine, Continued

How does tapering work?

You and your prescribing provider will work together to make a plan for tapering. Your **prescribing provider** is the healthcare provider who is managing your opioid prescription. (It's important that this healthcare provider — and all your healthcare providers — know about **all** the medicines you're taking, even those prescribed by others.)

Your tapering plan will include a plan for:

- **Lowering your dose over time.** This will be based on your specific needs. It will likely happen slowly.
- **Managing withdrawal symptoms if you have them.** With most people, tapering is done slowly enough that they don't have withdrawal symptoms. When they do have symptoms, they are minor. In a few cases, tapering needs to be done faster and may cause withdrawal symptoms. These can include cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, body aches, increased pain, trouble sleeping, and other symptoms. If this happens to you, your provider may be able to prescribe non-opioid medicines to help.
- **Managing your pain in other ways.** There are many ways to manage chronic pain besides opioids. Pain experts say these are some of the things that work best:
 - Other medicines besides opioids.
 - Physical therapy and exercise.
 - Meditation, mindfulness, biofeedback and other psychological approaches.
 - Doing activities that are meaningful to you may be helpful. These may include work, family activities, and keeping up with relationships.
 - Support groups for people with chronic conditions.

Stay in close touch with your prescribing provider

As you begin the tapering process, talk with your prescribing provider about your fears and concerns. They can be a great support during this process and can help you find the best non-opioid treatments for you.

You must keep all your appointments with your prescribing provider while you are tapering. Call your prescribing provider if you are having any new problems. They can help make this process easier and more comfortable. If you need it, they may also refer you to a pain specialist.

Ask your healthcare provider for the Intermountain Fact Sheet [Managing Chronic Pain: Treatment Options](#). It reviews many ways to manage pain without opioids.