

Weaning Off Opioid Pain Medicine

Opioid (narcotic) medicines can help people manage moderate to severe pain. Not everyone needs opioids for comfort. If opioids are needed, they are meant to be used for a short time. As your comfort improves, you will need to take less medicine. The acute pain response often lasts only 3-5 days.

As your comfort improves, you will wean off opioids. This means slowly taking less and less medicine until you are not taking it anymore. If you have only taken 1-2 doses a day for 3-5 days, you can simply stop taking them. If you take more than 4 doses a day for 5 days or more, you should wean the medicines.

How to Wean Off Opioids

Do not stop taking the opioids right away. You should slowly reduce the amount you are taking. **Talk with your care team about how to wean off opioids before you leave the hospital/clinic.** Opioids should be the first medicine that you wean from your comfort plan. Keep taking your other scheduled medicines as prescribed.

Weaning Off Short-Acting (Immediate Release) Opioids

This includes oxycodone, hydromorphone, or morphine. You can reduce the dose of opioids.

- If you are taking 3 pills each time, start taking 2 pills each time. Do this for 1 to 2 days.
- If you are taking 2 pills each time, start taking 1 pill each time. Do this for 1 to 2 days.

You can increase the amount of time between doses. If you are taking a dose every 4 hours, increase that time.

- Take a dose every 5 to 6 hours for 1 to 2 days.
- Then, take a dose every 7 to 8 hours for 1 to 2 days.

You may need to wean off opioids faster if the medicine is too strong for you. Some people feel very sleepy or have other side effects.

Weaning Off Long-Acting (Extended Release) Opioids

This includes oxycotin or MS Contin[®]. Weaning off these medicines takes longer. This should be done with your doctor's help. Together, you and your doctor will make a weaning plan that will work best for you.

Ways to Improve Comfort When Weaning

As you reduce the amount of opioids, keep taking other medicines as prescribed, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol[®]). Continue or try other non-drug treatments (heat, cold, relaxation techniques). In some cases, you will be told to **avoid** NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) such as ibuprofen (Advil[®], Motrin[®]) or naproxen (Aleve[®]).

Stopping Opioids Too Quickly

If you stop your opioids too quickly, you **may** have symptoms of withdrawal. Not all people will have this. Symptoms could include:

- Sweating, fever, shaking
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
- More pain
- Cravings
- Feeling anxious or agitated
- Feeling irritable or grouchy
- Feeling angry towards people

- Feeling tired and having trouble sleeping

These symptoms may start from 6 - 24 hours after taking the last dose of opioids. They are not a sign that you are addicted. They are a sign that your body is used to taking the opioids and needs to wean off the medicine more slowly. These symptoms may make you feel unwell, they are not harmful to your health.

Safe Medicine Disposal

The best option is to use a MedDrop box. Many of them are at local police stations. To find safe drop off sites, go to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration website:

<https://www.fda.gov/drugs/disposal-unused-medicines-what-you-should-know/drug-disposal-drug-take-back-locations>

Another option is to drop them off at a local “Prescription Drug Take Back Days.” These events happen about twice a year. Call your local public health office for details about the next event.

Other options:

- Go to the Safer Community website: www.safercommunity.net/meddrop. Choose the “Drug Poisoning Prevention” tab. Click on “MedDrop.”
- Go to the Dose of Reality website: doseofrealitywi.gov/drug-takeback/find-a-take-back-location

UW Health Take Back Bin Locations

Take back bins are found in the UW Health pharmacies listed below. All are in Madison, WI.

- [1 S. Park Clinic Pharmacy, 1 S. Park Street](#)
- [Arboretum Clinic Pharmacy, 1102 S. Park Street](#)
- [Northeast Family Medical Center Pharmacy, 3209 Dryden Drive](#)
- [East Clinic Pharmacy, 5249 E. Terrace Drive](#)
- [Union Corners Clinic Pharmacy, 2402 Winnebago Street](#)
- [University Hospital Outpatient Pharmacy, 600 Highland Avenue](#)
- [UW Health at The American Center Pharmacy, 4602 Eastpark Blvd](#)
- [West Clinic Pharmacy, 451 Junction Rd](#)
- [West Towne Clinic Pharmacy, 7102 Mineral Point Rd](#)

Options If No Drop Box Available

You may also buy a Deterra[®] Drug Deactivation System. It is easy to use and safe for the environment. You can buy it from local pharmacies. If you think you will need this, ask about it when picking up your medicine.

If there is no drop box in your area, mix the pills with either kitty litter or coffee grounds. Seal in a plastic bag and throw in the trash.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 7/2020 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#8099.