

Continued

Other non-medicinal therapies can also help you taper off opioids. These include:

Elevating the operative limb, intermittent ice packs, relaxation techniques, guided imagery.

How to store opioid medication

Use of opioid medications by someone other than who it is prescribed for is a serious growing problem in Canada.

You can help limit this problem by safely storing and disposing opioid medications (see below) in your home while you are using them. These medications should be kept out of sight of and ideally in a hidden or locked area.

Ensure others will not be able to access your opioid medications, especially children and the elderly. Ingestion of these drugs, intentionally or unintentionally, can

How to dispose of extra opioid medication

If you have unused opioids, it is important that you dispose of them correctly. In British Columbia, most pharmacies have a drug return program where they will properly dispose of extra medications. You may also dispose of them by crushing the pills into coffee grounds, kitty litter or another unpleasant

substance, which can then be thrown into the garbage. Never save medications, thinking you may use them at a later date. All medications have expiration dates and may not be safe to take later. If you require more opioid medications in the future, please see your doctor to discuss another prescription.

Your prescription for opioids is solely for you to take. Never share or give your medications to others, as it is illegal. Giving or selling these medications to others will put their health at risk.

Summary

Treating your pain is important for your recovery after surgery. Opioids are commonly prescribed and are effective medications for treating post surgical pain. These medications are safe as long as they are taken as prescribed.

To avoid unwanted side effects, the goal is take only the amount you require to treat your pain. When weaning yourself off opioids always taper your doses gradually.

It is important to store these medications securely while using them.

Responsible disposal of unused opioid medications is important for the wellbeing of yourself, your loved ones and the community.

Opioid Tapering

Information for patients taking opioid medication after hospitalization



Read this booklet to learn about:

- Using opioid medications for pain management
- Why you wean off opioid medication
- How to cut back slowly
- How to store opioid medications
- How to dispose of extra opioid medication

This pamphlet is intended to provide general information and may not apply to your situation.

Everybody experiences pain differently. The level of pain you have depends on the type of surgery you had as well as pre-existing conditions before surgery.

If you have any questions, you are always advised to talk to your doctor.

Opioid Medications

After surgery, you have been prescribed opioids as part of the regime to recover. Opioids are an important class of pain relieving medications. Commonly prescribed opioids are:

Codeine-including Tylenol 3, morphine including M-Eslon, MS Contin, oxycodone including Percocet, Endocet, OxyNeo and Hydromorphone (Dilaudid).

Opioid medications reduce painful transmission thereby reducing the pain you feel. Not all opioids are the same. They differ in strength and duration of action in your body.

Controlling your pain is a key component in your recovery after surgery for the following reasons:

To help resume your daily activities, to help you sleep, to help you undergo physiotherapy

Side effects of opioid medications include: sedation, confusion, nausea, vomiting, constipation, itchiness, inability to urinate and respiratory depression.

All of these side effects may occur at low doses but are more common at higher doses. The goal is to take the minimum amount of opioids to control your pain, which will limit undesirable side effects.

The most serious adverse effect is respiratory depression (reducing your drive to breathe).

The most serious adverse effect is respiratory depression (reducing your drive to breathe). This life-threatening medical emergency occurs with overdosing. It is extremely unlikely to occur if you take opioid medications as prescribed. Do not take more than your doctor has ordered.

Certain medical conditions, such as obstructive sleep apnea, may place you at a greater risk of respiratory depression. If you have sleep apnea, you must take extra care while taking opioid medications.

Use caution while using opioid medications with other sedating medications. These include medications that help with nervousness and sleep. It is best to talk to your doctor or pharmacist when you are prescribed opioids along with these medications. Do not drink alcohol while taking opioids as life-threatening sedation may occur.

Why you should wean off opioid medication

Long-term use of opioids may lead to addiction and dependency. However, if you are taking these medications for surgical pain and tapering the dose as your pain improves, the chance this will occur is very low.

Continuing to take opioid medications after your surgical pain has improved may place you at risk for dependency and addiction. About 5% of patients remain on opioids one year after surgery. Continuing to take these medications for prolonged periods may negatively affect your overall recovery and health.

How to taper off opioid medication

For most surgeries, the worst pain is experienced in the first 48-72 hours postoperatively. This is from the incision(s) and the inflammation around the site. As the site heals, the pain you experience should improve. When the surgical pain becomes manageable, you should start to taper off opioids.

When starting to wean off opioids:

Start to reduce the dose (the number of pills you take).

For example:

If you were taking 2 pills each time, start taking 1 pill to see if it controls the pain adequately. If it does, continue with 1 pill each time.

Do this for 1-2 days.

After step 1, start to increase the amount of time between doses.

For example:

If you are taking a dose every 4 hours, extend that time.

Take a dose every 6 hours for 1-2 days.

Then take a dose every 8 hours for 1-2 days.

Then consider stopping.

If you stop taking opioids abruptly, you may experience symptoms of withdrawal. These symptoms include:

Sweating, fever, nausea, vomiting, feeling agitated or irritable

Withdrawal symptoms are a sign that your body is used to taking opioids regularly and that you need to taper off opioids more slowly.

Taking other pain relieving medications such as Tylenol or Ibuprofen (anti-inflammatory) may help you taper off opioids. You should discuss with your doctor if these are appropriate.