



Tapering off Opioids

Is it Right for Me?

Benefits of Stopping Opioid Therapy

Many patients experience the following:

- + Less overall pain
- + Improved function with less drowsiness and more energy
- + Reduced risk of misuse, addiction, and accidental overdose
- + Fewer side effects like sedation, decreased concentration and memory, changes in mood, constipation, abdominal pain and nausea, sexual dysfunction, increased falls/accidents, and bone loss
- + Easier for health care providers to control your pain if you require surgery or have an acute injury

What Signs Indicate That It May be Time to Stop Taking Opioids?

- + Reduced pain relief from the same medications over time (tolerance)
- + Lack of meaningful improvement in pain and function
- + Feeling that you cannot stop taking opioids or have concerns about their addictive potential or side effects
- + New or worsening lung-related symptoms, breathing difficulties, snoring, or sleep apnea
- + Serious side effects

Precautions

- + Do **NOT** stop cold turkey. Opioid withdrawal can be dangerous and symptoms can be severe. When it's time for you to stop taking opioids, work with your provider to develop a withdrawal plan (called a taper) that gradually reduces the amount of medication you take. It may take weeks or even months to gradually and safely reduce your dose until you can stop taking opioid medications completely.
- + Do **NOT** go it alone. Stopping opioids can be difficult, but you can do it with help. You're much more likely to succeed if you partner with your health care team, plan a taper schedule, manage your symptoms, and learn alternative ways to cope with pain.

Achieving Success

- + Tapering plans should be individualized to minimize the symptoms of opioid withdrawal while maximizing pain treatment with nonpharmacologic therapies and nonopioid medications.
- + Go at your own pace! Many patients want to start slow. Faster tapers are more uncomfortable and are associated with greater withdrawal symptoms.
- + A decrease of 10% per month is a reasonable starting point if you've been taking opioids for 1 year or more. A decrease of 10% per week may be reasonable if you've been taking opioids for weeks to months (assuming the initial decrease is well tolerated).



Compass Opioid Prescribing + Treatment Guidance Toolkit



Getting Support

- + Coordinate with your provider and/or health care specialist.
 - + Medical guidance is especially important for patients at high risk of harm, including pregnant women.
- + Your providers will regularly assess your pain and function.
- + Nonpharmacologic and other nonopioid medication therapies can help.
- + Your provider will regularly assess you for signs of withdrawal.
 - + Nonpharmacologic therapies and other nonopioid medication can help. Your physician may manage your symptoms with the treatments described in **Table 1**.
- + Make sure you have access to appropriate psychosocial support.
 - + Ask to work with a mental health provider if needed.
- + Ask family and friends to watch for signs of anxiety and depression during the taper and offer support when needed.
- + If you have difficulties — especially withdrawal symptoms — ask for assistance regarding transportation, childcare, and other important activities.

Table 1 | Treating Withdrawal Symptoms

Withdrawal Symptom	Nonpharmacologic Treatment	Pharmacologic Treatment
Nausea and vomiting	Bland diet, frequent small meals	Ondansetron, prochlorperazine
Diarrhea	Hydration, electrolytes	Loperamide
Muscle aches	Stretching, exercise, heat, ice, topicals	Acetaminophen, ibuprofen
Abdominal cramping	Heating pad	Dicyclomine, hyoscyamine
Restlessness, shakes, sweats, rapid heart rate	Decrease stimulation (limit noise, dim lights)	Clonidine
Anxiety, insomnia	Psychosocial support, cognitive behavioral therapy, meditation	Gabapentin, hydroxyzine, trazodone

Understanding the Process

- + Fear about tapering is normal, but the process can be managed by:
 - + Discussing your fears
 - + Having a full understanding of the benefits and risks of reducing the use of opioids
 - + Remembering that there are no “stupid questions”
 - + Tapering slowly, keeping your provider fully informed of any successes or challenges you experience
- + Pain may initially get worse, but this experience is usually followed by improved function and decreased pain. There is good reason to feel optimistic about the ultimate outcome.

Staying Safe

- + After stopping or tapering to a lower dose of opioids, you are at an increased risk of overdose if you quickly return to a previously prescribed higher dose.
- + Have naloxone on hand for overdose treatment, and make sure your family members and friends know how to use it and are prepared to call 911 and provide rescue breathing if necessary.

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