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some things  
you should  
know about  
**opioids**  
before starting  
a prescription

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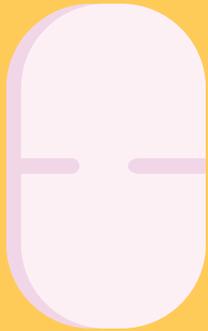
an informational booklet for  
opioid pain treatment

# This booklet was created to help you learn about opioids.

**You probably have lots of questions about starting an opioid treatment, and this booklet is here to help answer some of them.**

This is a companion to the animated video created and produced as a collaboration between the UC Davis Center for Design in the Public Interest (DiPi) and UC Davis Health System.

To see the video, search online for:  
“UC Davis opioid video”



**opioids**  
used to relieve  
severe pain

## Opioids are medications used to relieve severe pain.

**Opioids reduce the intensity of pain signals from your body and change how your brain perceives pain.**

They're usually prescribed to people who are injured, are recovering from surgery, or are suffering from chronic pain.

Norco, OxyContin, and fentanyl are common opioids.



But no matter which medication you've been prescribed, there are some important things you need to know in order to take opioids safely.

**This booklet will help you understand the purpose, risks, and safe use of opioid medication.**

For now, we'll use doctor to mean the healthcare professional who takes care of most of your needs. This could be a nurse practitioner or other provider.

## Opioids are rarely a permanent solution to chronic pain.

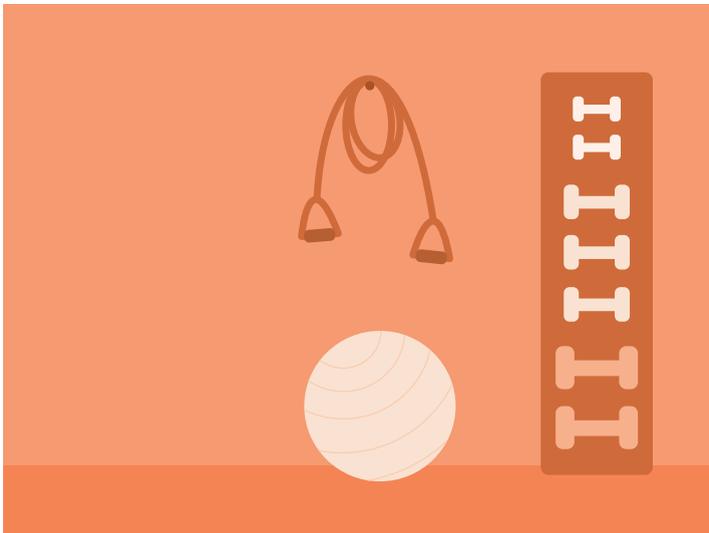
They can reduce some types of pain, but not all types, and can even make some pain worse. It's impossible for your doctor to predict how much your pain will decrease from taking opioids or how much your quality of life will improve.

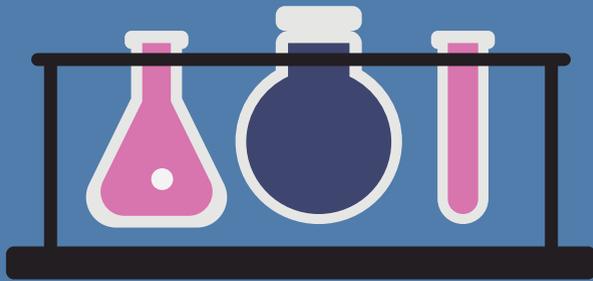




**Before prescribing opioids for you, your doctor may recommend other pain treatment options.**

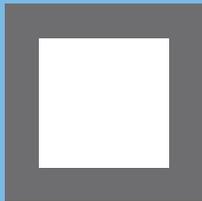
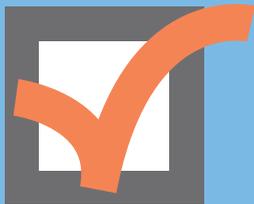
These could include things like physical therapy, or techniques to lower stress.





**Your doctor is careful with opioids because science hasn't proven any clear long-term benefits from using opioids for chronic pain, but it has proven clear and serious risks.**

This is why your doctor will want to make sure any benefits of using opioids outweigh the risks.



## **You'll want to develop goals with your doctor to make sure the treatment is working for you.**

And, you may be asked to sign an agreement in order to document that you and your doctor know what to expect of each other during your treatment.



Even if you take your medicine the way your doctor tells you to, there is still a risk for dependence, tolerance, and addiction.

**Dependence means a person's body feels like it needs a substance in order to function.**

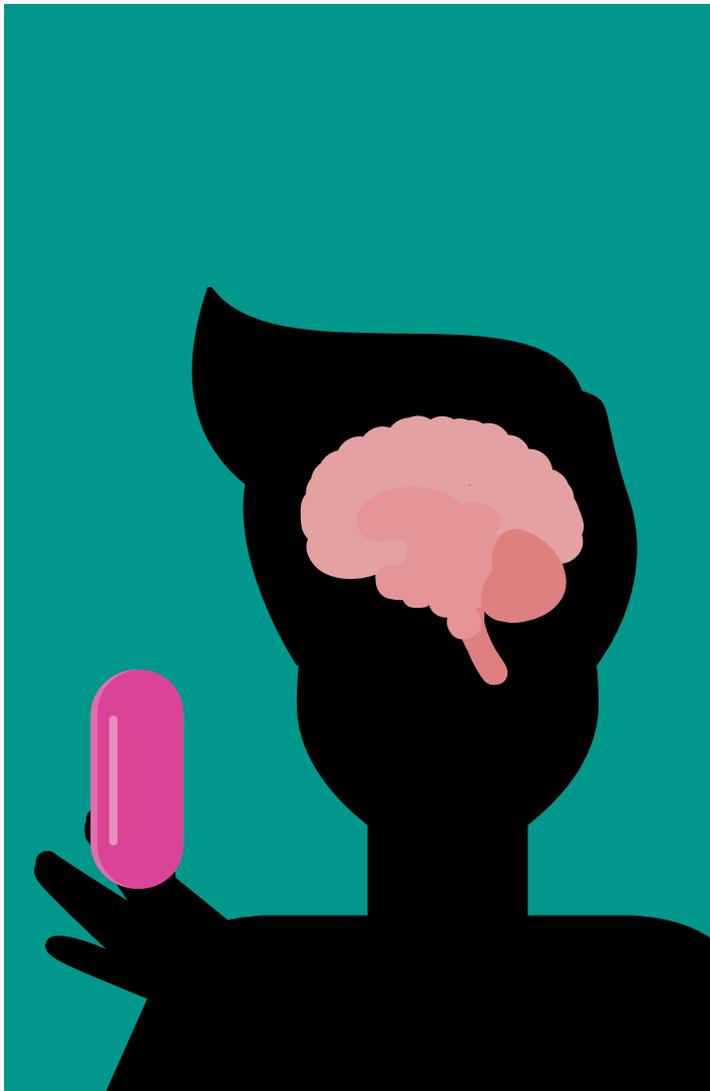
This is normal. If you're a coffee drinker, you might already know how this feels.

You know how some people get headaches or feel exhausted or cranky when they don't have coffee? These are withdrawal symptoms, and they can show up when a person's body doesn't get a substance it's dependent on.

**Tolerance happens when someone's body needs more of something to get the same effect.**

When someone first starts drinking coffee, they might only need one cup a day. After a while, they might need three cups a day to feel as awake.





Opioids work the same way. Your body will get used to the medication. Over time, you might feel like you need to take more to get the same level of relief. And if you stop taking it, you can experience withdrawal symptoms like sweating, nervousness, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Because withdrawal can be harmful as well as uncomfortable, you should talk to your doctor before making any changes to your dosage.

## **Dependence and tolerance are expected, but addiction is a much more serious matter.**

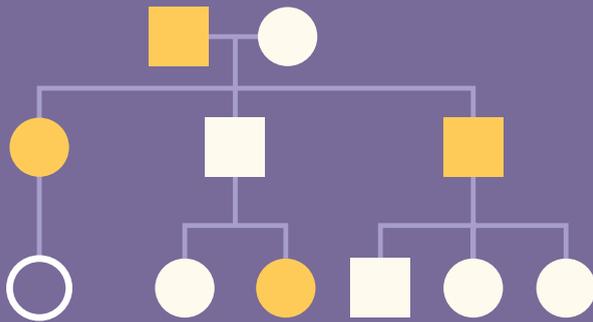
Addiction is a chronic disease that causes you to uncontrollably want to use a substance for reward instead of just for relief. Addiction is serious and can disrupt your personal life or your job.



**If you find yourself taking your medication more than you intend to, or if you take it to experience pleasure instead of to relieve pain, you might be addicted.**

**You should tell someone right away.**

# History of addiction?



Behaviors that are commonly associated with addiction include seeking opioids from other prescribers or non-medical sources; crushing, injecting, or snorting medicines; and increasing your dosage even if your doctor didn't tell you to.

**If addiction runs in your family, you might be more likely to become addicted.**

Tell your doctor about your and your family's past and present use of any habit-forming substances, like tobacco or alcohol, so your doctor can help you manage your risks.



Even if you take them the way your doctor says to, opioids can have uncomfortable and even dangerous side effects.

Common side effects include constipation, lowered testosterone levels, and drowsiness.

**Opioids can also cause life-threatening problems like trouble breathing during sleep, and overdose.**

Contact your doctor if you start to have any bothersome or unusual side effects. In a life-threatening emergency, call 911.



**Because opioid medications can make you sleepy or confused, or have other side effects, they may make it dangerous for you to do normal tasks.**

Be careful when doing things like driving a car, riding a bike, operating machinery, making important decisions, or anything else that requires you to be alert.

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## **When you take opioid medications, you are responsible for your safety and for the safety of those around you.**

To protect yourself and others, you must understand how to use opioid medications safely and responsibly.



You must take the type and amount of medication that your doctor prescribes for you. If you feel like you need a higher or lower dose, talk to your doctor.

**Don't try to get opioids from any other healthcare professional, and do not forge or alter your prescription.**

Your clinic's policy may require your doctor to monitor your medication intake.

**You may have to provide routine urine, blood, or saliva samples while you're taking an opioid.**





## **Opioids can harm an unborn baby.**

If you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant, tell your doctor.



## **Your opioids are for you and only you.**

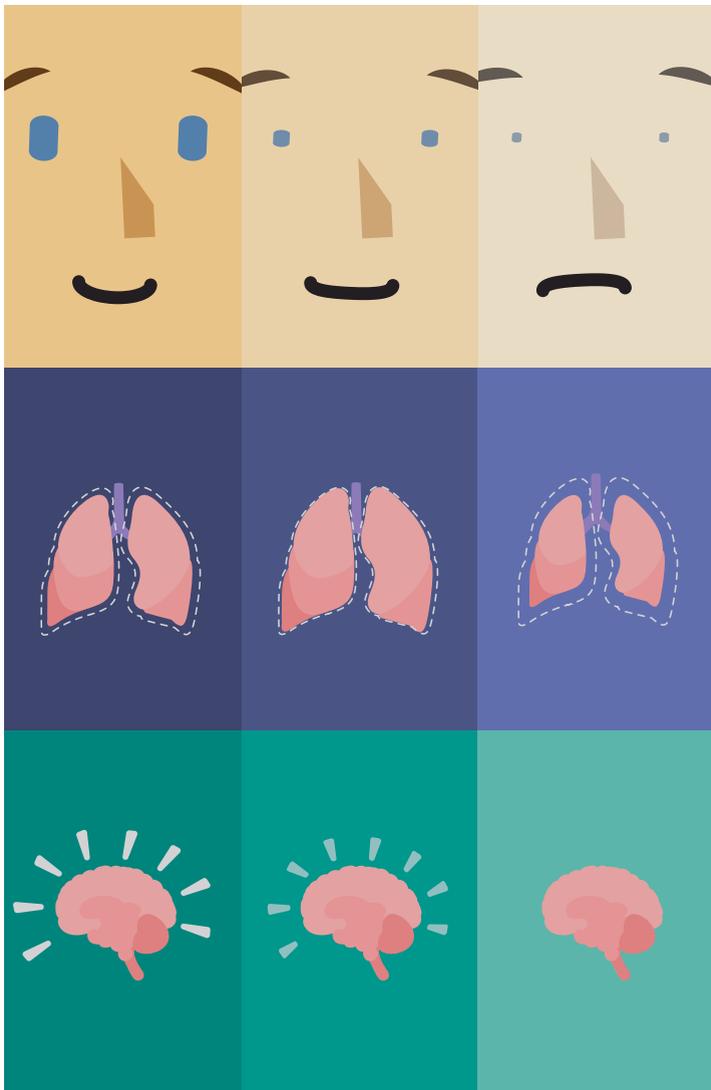
Do not share opioids with anyone, and always keep your medications in a locked cabinet out of reach of children and out of sight of others.



## **When you are no longer taking opioids, you must get rid of them safely.**

Talk to your pharmacist about options to dispose of them safely, or drop them off at a Drug Enforcement Administration event.

To find out more, visit the website of the DEA or your local public health department.



Learn the signs of opioid overdose and educate those around you.

## Three strong signs of overdose are:

- tiny, pinpoint pupils
- slow breathing
- unconsciousness

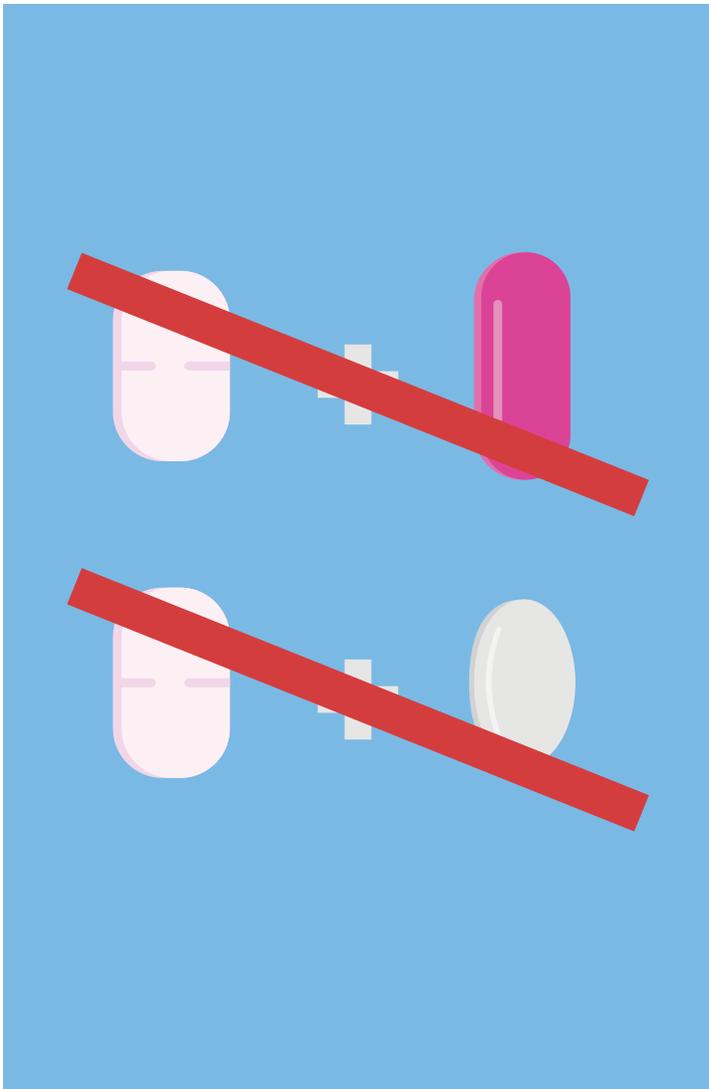


## **If someone has overdosed, a Naloxone kit can be used to save them.**

You can get a kit from a pharmacist without a prescription, but it may not be covered by your medical insurance.

## Mixing opioids with other substances is one of the most dangerous things you can do.

Taking opioids with allergy medicines (like Benadryl) or with sleeping aids (like Ambien) can seriously increase the chance of life-threatening side effects like slowed breathing, increased drowsiness, and decreased alertness.



# Benzodiazepines are especially dangerous



**Valium**  
(diazepam)



**Ativan**  
(lorazepam)



**Xanax**  
(alprazolam)



**Restoril**  
(temazepam)

And benzodiazepines, which are sleeping aids or anti-anxiety medicines, are especially dangerous.

**Most accidental deaths from opioids involve combining them with benzodiazepines, which include Valium, Ativan, Xanax, or Restoril.**

When combined with opioids, these medications slow down the activity of your brain and spinal cord so much that you could stop breathing.



While taking opioids, don't drink alcohol or use any illegal substances like cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, or non-prescribed pain medications. If your doctor finds out you are using any of these substances, she may have to reduce your prescription or stop it completely.

## **Opioids can be dangerous when they interact with many other substances.**

You should tell your doctor about any and all medications you are taking or planning to take.



All of these risks and uncertainties about opioids mean that patients taking opioids have a responsibility to be informed, active participants in their own care.

**Talk to your doctor about any questions you have about your opioid prescription.**

created as a collaboration between  
**UC Davis Center for Design in the Public Interest**  
and **UC Davis Health System**