What Should I Know About Opioids and Living With Chronic Pain?

At one time, chronic pain (lasting longer than 3 months) was routinely treated with opioid pain medications (oxycodeone, morphine, codeine, etc). But we now know that opioids are less effective and more risky than we thought, so many people are choosing other ways to treat chronic pain.

What Are the Risks of Opioids?
Even when taken as directed, opioids can cause side effects. These include tolerance (requiring more medication to have the same effect), dependence (developing unpleasant withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking opioids), increased sensitivity to pain, depression and fatigue, constipation, low sex hormone levels, itching, sweating, and overdose (slowed breathing, sedation, and possibly death).

Should I Start Taking an Opioid for Chronic Pain?
Taking an opioid medication should not be the first choice for chronic pain that is not caused by cancer. Evidence shows that less risky medications such as ibuprofen and acetaminophen can be equally effective. If you and your doctor decide you should start taking an opioid medication, it should be a part of a comprehensive pain treatment plan. Opioids should never be the only chronic pain treatment. Starting an opioid medication should be done as a limited trial with a set end date before reassessment of the risks and benefits of continuing treatment. Frequent consultations are necessary while taking opioid medications to assess pain control, physical function, quality of life, and safety.

If I Take Opioids for Chronic Pain, Should I Decrease or Stop?
There are many indicators that you should consider gradually decreasing or stopping your opioid medication, but you should not stop taking opioids suddenly unless you have a life-threatening side effect. Make a plan with your doctor to gradually decrease your use. Consider stopping opioids if you continue to have poor pain control and difficulty functioning in your life while taking opioids; studies show that if opioids are decreased slowly, pain and function can actually improve. Stop taking opioids if you experience significant side effects, if you have medical conditions or take other medications that put you at increased risk for side effects from opioids, or if you take high doses of opioids.

If you develop cravings for opioids or begin to lose control of your opioid use (eg, taking more pills than prescribed, taking other people’s opioids), it could be a sign of opioid use disorder (formerly called opioid addiction). If you notice any of these behaviors, talk with your doctor right away. There are effective treatments for these symptoms that can also help with pain control. If you start to feel depressed or hopeless in the setting of decreasing or stopping your opioids, contact your doctor immediately.

Reducing the risks of opioid use for chronic pain
Even when taken as directed, opioids can cause negative effects such as tolerance, dependence, increased sensitivity to pain, depression, constipation, low sex hormone levels, itching, sweating, and overdose.

Ways to reduce your risk while taking opioids
- Avoid drinking alcohol and using recreational drugs.
- Avoid taking other sedatives such as muscle relaxants and sleep medications.
- Take your medication as prescribed.
- Visit your doctor routinely to assess pain control, physical function, quality of life, and safety.
- Talk with your doctor about naloxone, which reverses opioid overdose and can be kept at home in case it is needed.
- Inform your doctor if you begin to feel any negative effects or if you begin to crave more medication than is prescribed.
- Store your medication in a safe place so other people cannot get to it.
- Consider working with your doctor to gradually decrease the dose of your opioid medication.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?
- Video on chronic pain: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_3ph893rvl
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/patients/index.html
- Mayo Clinic (available in multiple languages): https://www.mayoclinic.org/opioids
- SAMHSA National Helpline for Opioid Use Disorder: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255