



5-minute safety talk

Understanding opioid pain medications: Know the risks

Prescription medications are often helpful in recovery from illness and injury, and chances are you have received benefits from one or more prescribed by your physician. Almost every medication has some risk associated with taking it, including various side effects. Being an informed consumer is very important, especially for the category of drugs referred to as 'prescription opioid painkillers.'

Opioids are medications that relieve pain. Common brand names include Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet and Dilaudid. These drugs reduce the intensity of pain signals reaching the brain and affect the brain areas controlling emotion, which diminishes the effects of a painful stimulus. Opioid painkillers can impair you, affecting your ability to drive safely, or perform your work safely and effectively.

Opioid medications are powerful drugs and are highly addictive. The misuse and abuse of these medications is nothing short of an epidemic today, and in 2010, more than 16,000 people died of overdose from these medications. Leading up to overdose is the often untold story of a person who was legitimately prescribed one of these medications in too high a dose for too long, became dependent on that medication, and then addicted.

While typically prescribed with an intention for good and relief of pain, this category of medications has some very serious safety and health concerns.

You or a family member may be prescribed one of these medications for an injury, surgery or ongoing pain. It's important to be an informed consumer as you discuss the potential use of these medications with your medical providers and their impact on your safety at home and at work.

Be An Informed Consumer If You Are Prescribed An Opioid Painkiller

Is There An Alternative?

There are several alternative, non-opioid pain relievers. Ask your doctor if a non-opioid alternative can be prescribed. If not, ask your physician to limit the dose and length of time you take the medication. Be sure to talk to your doctor about the effect of the medication for safe driving, and the ability to perform your work safely and effectively.

Be Truthful About Your History

Be very clear and honest with your doctor about your medical history. There is no way to determine who will become addicted to a prescription painkiller, however, people with a history of substance abuse including alcohol or other drugs, or those who experience depression and anxiety, are more vulnerable.

Take As Directed

If you take an opioid prescription painkiller, over time you will feel less of the effect and need more of the medication. Do not use more without talking to your doctor. Safest use of these medications is generally at the lowest possible dose for the shortest duration.

Store Securely

Do not store these medications in your medicine cabinet, or a desk drawer at work. Select a very secure location for storage, preferably locked. These drugs are highly abused and are very often 'borrowed,' or stolen from unsecured places.

Don't Share Your Medications

Never share any medication your doctor has prescribed with family members, co-workers or anyone else. You may be endangering someone's life, or enabling someone else's dependency or addiction.

Don't Hang On to Old Prescriptions

Always safely dispose of medications once you have stopped taking them. Contact your community police department or pharmacy about how to do this.

Understand Your Workplace Policy About Prescription Medications That Cause Impairment

Be sure to understand the part of your workplace policy that talks about prescription drug use. Prescription opioid medications greatly increase the risk for incidents and errors. It is important that your physician knows if you are in a safety sensitive job, or responsible for any other work where impairment creates an unsafe or high-risk situation. Work with your employer if legitimate prescription use is necessary.

Working as a team with your medical provider, prescription drugs can be helpful and important for treatment. If prescription opioids are recommended, know the alternatives, understand the safety risks and work with your medical provider about your concerns. You should also understand your employer's policy and what to do if the safety and effectiveness of your work may be affected.

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