CHRONIC OPIOID THERAPY

Opioid Medications

Opioid medications may be a helpful part of chronic pain treatment for some people; however, misuse of opioid medications may result in serious harm to patients prescribed them and, when the medications are diverted, to the public at large. As opioid use for pain management has increased in recent years, injury, addiction, and death due to misuse of opioids have also increased.

Patients and healthcare providers both have responsibilities for the safe use of opioid medications. It is important for your healthcare providers especially your prescriber to educate you on the risks associated with opioid therapy.

Some common side effects and risks associated with opioid therapy include:

1. Physical side effects

   i. Sedation: Opioids can make you very drowsy and sedated especially on initiation of the medication or with changes in doses. This can increase your risk for falls and severe injury. You should not operate a motor vehicle or other heavy machinery if on this medication. You should not combine this medication with other classes of sedatives such as alcohol, benzodiazepines, barbiturates, or marijuana. You should avoid making serious decisions until you know how opioids will affect your body.

   i. Constipation: Opioids cause infrequent, hard bowel movements and constipation is one of the most common side effects of the medication. Stool softeners can help ease the discomfort. In some cases it may cause a slowing of your gut to the point of developing bowel obstruction which may require surgery.

   i. Nausea & Vomiting: Nausea and sometimes vomiting are a side effect of opioid medications. This seems to be dose dependent. If you have these symptoms, your prescriber will decrease the dose of the opioid medication and at times may have to discontinue them.

   i. Respiratory Failure/ Failure to Breathe: Opioids are known to slow down the body’s breathing cycle, which can at times be fatal. Not taking the medication as prescribed can especially result in this serious complication. It can happen in one’s sleep. Some medications have delayed side effects. This means the side effect doesn’t appear until hours or days after taking the medication. Please do not combine other sedating medications, including alcohol, while using pain medication. In case of overdose, please call 911 immediately.

2. Sexual difficulties

   Morphine and morphine-like compounds have demonstrated a progressive decline in cortisol and the sex hormones secreted in the body, including testosterone depletion. The collective effects have been shown to lead to decreased libido, decreased testicular size, infertility, and gynecomastia (breast development in males). In females they may affect menstrual periods.
3. **Effect on your immunity**

   Opioid medication appears to alter how our bodies respond to illness or injury. Animal studies have demonstrated that long-term opioid use has direct effects on suppressing the cells that regulate our immunity and can make us more susceptible to infections. There is some data though not conclusive that it may increase the incidence of cancer. This may also affect your healing after injury.

4. **Physical dependence**

   Suddenly stopping chronic opioid therapy may lead to withdrawal symptoms including abdominal cramping, pain, diarrhea, sweating and irritability.

5. **Tolerance**

   A dose of an opioid may become less effective overtime even though there is no change in your physical condition. Many patients taking opioids for chronic pain find they have to continually increase their dose to get the same pain relief. Over time, opioid receptors in the body become less sensitive to the drug. This is called tolerance. Taking higher doses of opioids leads to a greater risk of side effects. In addition, at some point even higher doses will not relieve pain. If this happens, talk with your doctor about other ways to manage pain.

6. **Addiction**

   Is more common in people with personal or family history of addiction, but can occur in anyone. It is suggested by drug craving, loss of control and poor outcomes of use.

7. **Hyperalgesia**

   Long-term use of opioids may actually make pain worse in many patients. This is called opioid-induced hyperalgesia. It happens when opioid use causes the body to be extra sensitive to usually non-painful things. Taking more opioids will make pain worse or cause pain in other areas of the body. Recently, a scientific trial by a German researcher revealed that when patients were weaned off their pain medication, they experienced less pain than when they were on high doses. Opioid-induced hyperalgesia can be a vicious cycle of total body pain and can be prevented by lowering your dose of opioid medication over time.

8. **Overdose**

   Taking more than the prescribed amount of medication or using with alcohol or other drugs can cause you to stop breathing resulting in coma, brain damage, or even death.

9. **Sleep apnea (periods of not breathing while asleep)**

   May be caused or worsened by opioids.

10. **Risk to unborn child**

    Risks to unborn children may include: physical dependence at birth, possible alterations in pain perception, possible increased risk for development of addiction, among others. Tell your provider if you are or intend to become pregnant.
Overview & Consent

CHRONIC OPIOID THERAPY

11. Victimization

There is a risk that you or your household may be subject to theft, deceit, assault or abuse by persons seeking to obtain your medications for purposes of misuse.

12. Life-threatening irregular heartbeat

Can occur with methadone, EKG will be obtained prior to treatment initiation and periodically after as indicated.

13. Driving under the influence of drugs

Opioid medications especially at initiation of therapy or with changes in doses can impair your ability to drive or operate machinery. It is against the law and unsafe for you to drive when impaired or to operate machinery.

14. Effect on your Cognition and Psychological Dysfunction

Short-term effects of taking opioids may include drowsiness or mental fogginess. There are recent studies on the long-term effects of opioid medications on the brain. These have begun to explain the mechanisms responsible for the nearly permanent alterations in the brain structure, functioning and even drug-induced DNA changes. Long term opioid use and addiction can cause brain matter deterioration and associated psychological dysfunction. Patients typically report depression, and increased functional disability. Their personal relationship with families and friends may fall apart, and they may lose interest in life altogether.

At the Center for Pain & Wellness at UC Irvine Health, we strongly believe that the management of chronic pain is best addressed by participating in a multi-disciplinary program with goal directed physical therapy, cognitive and behavioral therapies in addition to medications and interventions. The sole use of opioid medications to relieve chronic pain has been shown to be inadequate long-term therapy and in fact there are many potential adverse consequences.

Your provider will outline a comprehensive plan for the management of your pain. Opioids may play a role in the goal directed management of your pain for limited amounts of time.

Consent for Chronic Opioid Therapy

I have reviewed this document and been given the opportunity to have any questions answered. I understand the possible benefits and risks of opioid medications and consent to treatment with opioids under the direction of my physician.

______________________________  ____________________________  ____________________________
Patient                                         Date                  Attending Provider                           Date
References