

Medication Safety for Older Adults



Pain management: Opioids

Treating pain in older adults can present significant challenges. Opioids are a group of drugs generally used to relieve severe, acute, temporary pain. They are powerful drugs and are commonly prescribed following surgeries and to treat conditions with high levels of pain. They can have mild side effects, such as sleepiness, or more serious side effects, such as slowed breathing and heart rate. They also can be highly addictive because of the relaxed feeling or “high” they produce.

Common names of opioid medications include Vicodin, Percocet, oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine and codeine. Overdose, brain damage and death are serious concerns with this class of drugs, as are serious withdrawal symptoms after stopping the medication.

According to the 2018 Ohio Health Issues Poll, about three out of 10 Ohioans have been prescribed a pain reliever in the past five years and one in 10 of these say their prescriber gave them more medicine than they needed.

Although opioids are not appropriate to treat long-term, chronic pain, your health care professional may prescribe them when non-prescription remedies (e.g., aspirin, Tylenol, Advil) aren’t effective or no longer relieve your pain. **These medicines come with serious risks for you to consider, including:**

- Potential psychological dependence or addiction;
- Unintentional overdose;
- Serious side effects, such as sedation, nausea or vomiting; and
- Other individuals stealing or accessing your prescribed medications without permission.

To reduce these risks, follow your doctor’s instructions carefully and take the medication exactly as prescribed. Make sure your health care provider knows about other medications and supplements you are taking when he or she prescribes an opioid for you.