



10 Things Women Should Know About Prescription Opioids



Whether you are managing post-surgery pain, chronic pain or another health challenge, it is important to understand any prescriptions you may be given to manage your discomfort. Here are 10 things you should know when a healthcare professional prescribes you opioids.

- 1 Prescription opioids are medications prescribed by healthcare providers to reduce pain.
- 2 Prescription opioids may be prescribed to treat moderate to severe pain for health conditions that cause acute or chronic discomfort, as well as for pain following surgery or injury.
- 3 Common prescription opioids include:
 - Oxycodone
 - Hydrocodone
 - Methadone
 - Codeine
 - Morphine
 - Oxymorphone
 - Fentanyl
- 4 Although prescription opioids can be effective in relieving pain, they come with serious risks and side effects, as well as the potential for misuse, abuse, and overdose.
- 5 The most common prescription opioids involved in deaths from overdose are methadone, oxycodone and hydrocodone.
- 6 Risk factors for overdosing include:
 - Using opioids with other medications, drugs or alcohol
 - Taking more than prescribed.
 - Taking a high daily dose of opioids
 - Certain conditions such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, HIV, sleep apnea, or liver or lung disease
 - Pregnancy
 - Older age
 - History of substance abuse
- 7 A baby will have withdrawal symptoms for a few days or weeks. Swaddling, breastfeeding and skin-to-skin contact provide relief for babies who are experiencing symptoms. Symptoms should be managed under the guidance of a healthcare provider.
- 8 Women who have a hard time stopping the use of opioids may have opioid use disorder.
- 9 For some women, opioids are necessary to relieve severe pain. For other women, alternative options — such as over-the-counter pain medications (acetaminophen or ibuprofen), therapeutic exercise, physical therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness meditation, biofeedback, acupuncture and massage — may be effective at reducing pain.
- 10 Women who are seeking ways to manage pain safely and effectively should understand the potential benefits and risks of taking opioids and discuss options with fewer risks and side effects with their healthcare providers.





Women and Opioid Use: Demographics



Pain management for men and women is not a one-size-fits-all situation. Here, we take a closer look specifically at opioid use in women.

Overall Prescription Opioid Use, Abuse and Misuse



Women are more likely to be prescribed opioids than men.¹



Prescription rates for opioids were highest among women in the South and lowest in the Northeast from 1999 to 2015.²



Women tend to have more chronic pain, take more pain medications and often at higher doses and use painkillers longer than men.³



In 2017, 15,263 women died of opioid-related overdoses (prescription and illicit) — more than 41 per day.⁴



Between 1999 and 2016, overdose deaths from illicit drugs and prescription opioids rose by 583 percent in women.⁵



Women are 40 percent more likely to become persistent users of opioids after surgery. Persistent use may be a sign of dependence and lead to prescription opioid misuse.⁶



Women have unique medical needs that put them at higher risk for prescription opioid abuse, including:

- giving birth via cesarean section; and
- requiring surgeries for diseases and conditions affecting women uniquely or disproportionately, such as mastectomy for breast cancer, breast reconstruction and hysterectomy.⁷



Women addicted to prescription opioids are more likely to have experienced a traumatic event, many at a young age. Women may be more likely to use opioids to manage the effects of trauma and help them cope with negative emotions and pain.⁸

Family Implications of Prescription Opioids

Women are more likely than men to serve as family caregivers, which makes understanding the safe storage and disposal of prescription opioids even more important.⁹

Teenagers are 30 percent more likely to abuse prescription opioids if a parent has ever abused a prescription opioid.¹⁰

Opioid Use Disorder Treatment

Women who are in caregiving roles or have children often do not seek treatment or complete treatment for fear that they can't manage responsibilities, or they will have their children removed.¹¹

Women often experience greater negative stigma around prescription opioid abuse and are less likely to enter treatment programs than men.¹²

1. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31203-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31203-0/fulltext)
 2. <https://www.womenshealth.gov/files/documents/final-report-opioid-508.pdf>
 3. Ibid
 4. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/opioid-overdose-deaths-by-gender/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>
 5. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31203-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31203-0/fulltext)
 6. <https://www.healthywomen.org/content/article/survive-opioid-addiction-crisis-women-need-more-just-say-no-slogans>
 7. Ibid

8. <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/visions/opioids-vol13/what-do-trauma-and-gender-have-to-do-with-opioid-use>
 9. <https://www.caregiver.org/caregiver-statistics-demographics>
 10. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/143/3/e20182354>
 11. <https://www.womenshealth.gov/files/documents/final-report-opioid-508.pdf>
 12. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31203-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31203-0/fulltext)



Questions to Ask Your Provider About Opioids

Statistically, U.S. women are more likely than men to be prescribed opioids. Studies show that across all age groups, women are 40 percent more likely to become persistent users of opioids.¹ Their higher rate of opioid use stems from increased instances of chronic pain, which can lead women to take more pain medications, often at increased doses, and use painkillers longer than men.

Avoiding misuse or overuse of opioid medications starts with a conversation with your healthcare provider. When you visit your provider, it is often helpful to bring a list of questions to ask, especially for women who have unique health needs, such as pregnancy, depression, anxiety or a history of substance abuse. It is important to have a full understanding of the risks of opioids as well as possible alternative treatments. You also have a responsibility to know how to take opioids properly and dispose of them to keep these medicines out of the hands of others.

The questions below can help you navigate conversations with your provider.^{2,3}

- 1 Is this pain medicine an opioid?
 - 2 What are the risks associated with this medication?
 - 3 What are the potential side effects of opioids?
 - 4 Should I expect changes in my mood or how I feel?
 - 5 How can I reduce the risk of potential side effects from this medication?
 - 6 Are there other options available that would help me manage my pain?
 - 7 When should I take the medicine and what is the correct dosage?
 - 8 How will opioids interact with my other medications? Are there any activities that I should not do while taking opioids?
 - 9 When should I stop taking the opioids and when would you like to see me again to discuss my progress?
 - 10 Should I consider partially filling this prescription?
 - 11 Should I also get a prescription for naloxone (medication that can temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose) to keep at home?
 - 12 Do you provide at-home drug disposal products?
- For women who are currently or may become pregnant**
- 13 What precautions should I take regarding opioids during my pregnancy — and during the postpartum period?
 - 14 Are there any warning signs related to opioid use that I should watch for during pregnancy?

You will also want to let your healthcare provider know about the other medications you are taking, as well as health conditions that could impact how your body reacts to opioids. This information could include:

- Your current medication list;
- Alcohol use
- Other ways you are managing pain; and,



Your trusted healthcare provider can offer the best advice to ensure that you stay as healthy as possible. For more resources about opioids from Allied Against Opioid Abuse, visit www.AgainstOpioidAbuse.org.

1. https://www.planagainstpain.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ChoicesMatter_Report_2018.pdf
2. <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/patients/Opioids-for-Acute-Pain-a.pdf>
3. <https://www.fda.gov/media/103483/download>



Safe Storage and Disposal

Safe storage and disposal are important parts of reducing abuse and misuse of prescription opioids because opioid misuse often starts in the home. In fact, 53 percent of those who misused prescription pain relievers in 2017 said that they obtained the medicine from a friend or relative.¹

Women play a critical role in promoting the safe storage and disposal of prescription medication. Recent data show that women are more likely to be prescribed opioids for chronic pain and chronic conditions.² Additionally, they are responsible for approximately 80 percent of the healthcare decisions for their families and are more likely to serve as family caregivers than men.^{3,4} They are more likely to be the family members filling prescriptions and keeping track of dosages, as well as overseeing the safe storage and disposal for others.

If you or a family member receive an opioid prescription, make sure to follow the steps below to safely and securely store the medicine.

What You Can Do to Safely Store and Dispose of Prescription Opioids

- 1 Store all opioids in their original packaging, so you retain the prescription information, directions for use and expiration date.
- 2 Keep opioids in a locked cabinet or lockbox away from family members and house guests.
- 3 Consider using a metered pill dispenser system with a timer or a smartphone-enabled pill box to keep you on schedule, prevent accidental overdose, and lock when it's not dosing time to protect others from taking pills.
- 4 If you wear a fentanyl patch, consider covering it with adhesive film to make sure it doesn't fall off and regularly check to make sure it is still in place. The FDA recommends that patients periodically check their patch to ensure it is still sticking to the skin properly.
- 5 Be sure to keep these medicines out of reach of young children, who can accidentally consume or abuse the prescription opioids.
- 6 Be sure to monitor the medicine you take and how much you have left so you will know if there is any missing medicine.
- 7 When you are done using your prescription opioids, follow disposal directions you received with your medicines. If you did not receive directions, ask your healthcare professional or pharmacist about disposal or consult the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines.
- 8 Take advantage of programs that accept unused medications for proper disposal. Find the disposal location in your area by visiting www.AgainstOpioidAbuse.org/disposal.

Taking Action to Address the Opioid Crisis

Making an impact on the opioid epidemic in the U.S. the opioid crisis requires multiple approaches and collaborations. HealthyWomen, an AAOA partner, has assembled a toolkit intended to help state legislators (and others) interested in addressing the opioid epidemic in the U.S. Resources for strengthening families and communities by improving access to treatment for opioid use disorder can be downloaded [here](#).

1. 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, SAMHSA: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2017-nsduh-annual-national-report>
2. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31203-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31203-0/fulltext)
3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25418222>
4. <https://www.caregiver.org/caregiver-statistics-demographics>