

# Combating the Opioid Crisis:

## What Are Opioids Anyway?

Opioids are types of medications that relax your body and reduce pain. They are used to treat moderate to severe pain that over-the-counter medications cannot treat. They are very strong, and you can become addicted to them very quickly. Some opioids, like heroin, are illegal.

### What makes them so dangerous?

Opioids are dangerous because they are so strong and so addictive. Even people who take their opioid prescriptions as prescribed can become addicted to them.

### How are opioids different from other drugs?

- Opioids are dangerous because they are very strong substances that can easily make a person want to keep taking them even when the person struggles with harmful effects. Some medications that doctors prescribe contain opioids. Many people take opioids exactly as they are prescribed but still develop a substance use disorder because the drugs are so powerful.
- Someone who struggles with stopping the use of opioids is said to have an opioid use disorder.
- A severe substance use disorder is sometimes called an addiction.

### What exactly is an addiction?

- Addiction is your body telling you that it has become dependent on a substance. You can become addicted even if an opioid has been prescribed to you by a doctor. Having a problem with an addiction does not mean you have done something wrong.
- Someone struggling with an addiction to a substance has a hard time NOT taking the substance because they have uncomfortable or painful symptoms when they stop taking it. They feel an urge to take the substance again so that they can feel better. The uncomfortable symptoms and feelings come back, so they take the substance again, even when doing so causes problems with family, friends, school, or work.

## When should I be worried that I am addicted to a substance?

- You think about the substance a lot.
- The thought of not having the substance scares you.
- You tried to take less of the substance but could not.
- Your use of the substance is hurting your relationships with family and friends.

If you checked any box, reach out to a family member, teacher, coach, counselor, or doctor for help.

## What If I am prescribed opioids by my doctor and I need to take them for pain?

- Use opioids only when you need them. Ask about other ways to relieve your pain.
- Take as little of the opioid as possible to treat your pain.
- Do not take more of your opioid without talking with your doctor first.
- Talk with your doctor about a plan for when and how to stop taking the drug.
- Do not allow others to take medications prescribed to you.
- Ask an adult to help you dispose any leftover medication properly.

— Visit [artakeback.org](https://artakeback.org) for more information about disposing of leftover opioids. —

### According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, people begin taking drugs for a variety of reasons, including:

- to feel good – feelings of pleasure, “high” or “intoxication”
- to feel better – relieve stress, forget problems, or feel numb
- to do better – improve performance or thinking
- curiosity and peer pressure – or experimenting

### Examples of opioids:

- Hydrocodone
- Oxycotin
- Fentanyl
- Codeine
- Demerol
- Morphine
- Heroin

## How dangerous can opioids be?

### Less serious side effects:

- Sleepiness
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Nausea
- Constipation
- Difficulty urinating
- Sweating
- Low energy
- Low strength
- Dry mouth
- Itching

### Serious side effects:

- Slowed breathing
- Worsening pain
- Depression
- Tolerance
- Brain injury
- Coma
- Dependency/addiction
- Withdrawal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, fever, anxiety, trouble sleeping, hallucinations, and seizures
- Overdose or death

Information resourced from:

Chronic Pain and What You Can Do About It, UAMS Center for Healthy Literacy.  
[healthliteracy.UAMS.edu](https://healthliteracy.UAMS.edu)

“What is a Substance Use Disorder?” American Psychiatric Association  
[psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction/what-is-addiction](https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction/what-is-addiction)

Accessed 15 Oct. 2021.