

OPIOIDS are made from the opium poppy or synthetically produced. Opioid medications are effective painkillers, and opioids can also make users feel intense pleasure. Heroin is an opioid; however, it is not used medically and is not available to buy legally.

People who misuse or abuse opioid drugs can easily become addicted to them. Opioid medications include codeine, morphine, hydromorphone (Dilaudid®), oxycodone (Percodan®), fentanyl (Duragesic®), meperidine (Demerol®), pentazocine (Talwin®) and propoxyphene (Darvon®).

Some opioids can be combined with such drugs as Aspirin® (ASA) and Tylenol® (acetaminophen) to increase pain relief.

Opioid drugs can be taken orally in tablet form or through a transdermal patch. They can also be injected, snorted or smoked.

Illegal possession of opioids or producing or trafficking in opioids can result in fines or prison sentences, as can prescription shopping (getting a prescription for opioids without informing the doctor you had another opioid prescription in the last 30 days).

Effects of short-term use

- Besides pain relief and euphoria (intense pleasure), opioid drugs can cause nausea and vomiting, constipation, drowsiness, tiny pupils, blurred vision and poor night vision.
- Low doses of some opioid drugs may impair driving ability, but with repeated use, tolerance may develop and a person may feel less impaired.
- Higher doses can lower heart rate, blood pressure and breathing. People who take very high doses can hallucinate, become disoriented, have convulsions and stop breathing.
- Overdose can result in coma and death. Combining opioid drugs with other depressants such as alcohol or tranquillizers is especially dangerous.
- High doses of codeine with acetaminophen can cause kidney and liver damage.
- Taking large doses of some of the synthetic opioids can cause tremors and seizures.

Effects of long-term use

- People who misuse opioid drugs can feel depressed and have difficulty concentrating and sleeping. Sexual problems may occur. Constipation is a common side effect.
- The regular use of codeine with ASA can cause stomach bleeding.

Effects of Abuse of Opioids

- Abuse of drugs, even medications, can lead to serious personal problems. Using drugs can become more important than family and friends. Users may continue using even when their job or schoolwork suffers or when drug use causes financial, health, spiritual or legal problems.
- Young people who frequently misuse drugs may not develop the skills they need to solve problems or handle their emotions in healthy ways.
- Women dependent on opioids have an increased risk of miscarriage during withdrawal.
- Babies born to women addicted to opioids may be born addicted and may go through withdrawal after birth.

Addiction

Regular users of opioid painkillers may find that they need more and more of the drug to feel the same effects and may become mentally and physically addicted to the painkillers.

Dependent and addicted users who suddenly quit using opioids get withdrawal symptoms including cravings for the drug, runny nose, yawning, sweating, restless sleep, weakness, stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle spasms, chills, irritability and pain. Acute withdrawal symptoms usually last between seven and ten days. Tapering off the opioid under medical supervision can help ease withdrawal symptoms. Methadone maintenance treatment is also an option for people dependent on opioid.

For more information, contact your local pharmacist, local AADAC office, or call 1 (866) 33AADAC.