

Opioids

How to Manage Common Side Effects

Constipation

Opioids can slow down your bowels—causing hard, dry bowel movements, straining, bloating, constipation and heartburn. This is one side effect of these medicines that may not get better with time, so don't wait until it has become severe. Prevention is best, particularly if you normally experience any of these problems before starting opioids. There are several ways to prevent and treat constipation, starting with dietary measures:

- fibre—at least 20mg per day (e.g., 1 cup of All Bran® cereal) plus
- one tablespoon of flax seed with one cup of prune juice

Drink at least 4-6 glasses of water per day.

Your doctor may recommend medications (such as Docusate®, Milk of Magnesia®, Senokot® and Lactulose®) to add to this regime, if necessary. Taking medications for constipation will not harm your bowels, even if they are taken for a long time. If these steps are unsuccessful, your doctor may be able to switch you to a less-constipating opioid.

Nausea

Nausea rarely lasts more than a week or so after you begin taking opioids. Until then, there are effective medications you can take, including:

Gravol® (25-50mg every 4-6 hours as needed)—this medication may be most effective if you take it one hour before your opioid. If it makes you drowsy, talk to your doctor. He/she may prescribe haloperidol.

Drowsiness

Drowsiness is usually mild if the opioid is slowly increased, and gradually goes away after 7-14 days of the same dosage. It's important NOT to drive or operate dangerous machinery until you know how you will be affected by opioid medications, both when you start to take them and when you increase the dose.

Confusion

Depression, hallucinations (imagining that you hear or see things), or nightmares may also occur. These symptoms are very rare and usually only occurs if the dosage is too high, or during the first few days of medication in an elderly person. Stop the medication and talk to your doctor.

Itching

Itching usually is not an allergy. It is often temporary, and can be successfully treated with any of the “non-drowsy” antihistamines (e.g., Claritin®, Reactine®, Allegra®). If these medications don't work ask your doctor about other medications.

You may also experience other side effects while taking opioids. Be sure to talk to your doctor, as most of them can be treated successfully. Remember, whenever another doctor prescribes any other medication for you, ask your pharmacist if it will interfere in any way with your opioid medication.

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