

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT OPIOID USE DISORDER

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What Is Opioid Use Disorder?

Opioid use disorder (OUD) is a treatable chronic disease. If you feel out of control using opioids, or if you continue to use opioids despite negative effects on your life, you may have OUD. OUD makes it hard for people to stop using opioids, even when they want to stop. It can also cause problems at work, home, or school. Untreated OUD affects your life and the lives of those around you. It significantly increases your risk for death due to overdose and serious illnesses that can accompany opioid use.

What Are the Warning Signs?

You may have OUD if you:

- Use opioids for longer than you planned
- Have trouble cutting back on your use
- Spend a lot of time trying to get opioids
- Have strong cravings and urges to use opioids
- Have problems at work, at school, at home, or socially because of opioid use
- Continue to use opioids even if they cause problems for you
- Feel like you need to use more opioids than before to get the same effects
- Have withdrawal symptoms (cravings, anxiety, restlessness, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, sweating, fast heart rate) when you stop using opioids

How Does It Harm My Health?

OUD can have serious negative effects on your overall health, including increased risk for:

- Overdose and death
- Infection (including HIV, hepatitis B and C, other viral infections, and bacterial infections)
- Addiction (including to alcohol and other drugs)
- Low sex drive
- Depression and anxiety
- Constipation
- Decreased bone density
- Suicide

What Should I Do if I Think I May Have a Problem With Opioid Use?

- Talk to your doctor about your opioid use and its effects on your life. Be prepared to talk about how much and what type of opioids you use, how you use them, and if you use any other substances (such as other illicit drugs, tobacco, and alcohol).
- You may answer a series of questions that will help your doctor make a diagnosis.
- Your doctor will assess you for mental health problems, like depression and anxiety.
- You may have blood and urine tests to check for health problems caused by opioids and other drug and alcohol use.



- Ask about treatment options and the role of naloxone to prevent death from overdose for you and those around you.

How Is OUD Treated?

Medications, such as buprenorphine and methadone, are very effective in treating opioid withdrawal symptoms and helping people stop other opioid use. They also help prevent opioid overdose.

Depending on the medication you and your doctor choose, you might be treated in their office or in an opioid treatment program. Along with medication, your doctor might recommend other strategies, like counseling, psychiatric care, peer recovery coaching, or residential treatment. Most people can be treated as outpatients without residential treatment.

If you have mental health symptoms like depression or anxiety, tell your doctor and ask for help managing them.

If you are not ready to stop using opioids, your doctor can help you reduce health risks by:

- Getting vaccinated for hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and tetanus
- Using clean needles
- Using condoms
- Quitting tobacco use
- Carrying naloxone to prevent death from overdose and teaching people around you how to use it
- Taking medicine to prevent HIV infection if you are at high risk

Questions for My Doctor

- How does or how will my opioid use affect my health?
- Would you write me a prescription for naloxone and show me how to use it?
- Would you connect me with buprenorphine or methadone treatment for OUD?
- Are there additional medications I should take to treat withdrawal symptoms?
- What other steps can I take to prevent complications from OUD?
- How do I access additional emotional support?

For More Information



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/opioids/patients/index.html

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma18-4742.pdf>

MedlinePlus

<https://medlineplus.gov/opioidmisuseandaddiction.html>