

The Opioid Epidemic:

Safely Taking, Storing, and Disposing of Prescription Opioids

What should I do if my doctor prescribes opioids?

Opioids are used to treat short-term or chronic pain, so you may be prescribed them if you get surgery or experience an injury.¹ For acute pain, the Center for Disease Control recommends opioid use for no more than 3 days.¹

Some factors that increase the risk of someone experiencing dangerous side effects include: obesity, tobacco use, sleep apnea, personal or family history of substance abuse, anxiety or depression, and fibromyalgia.²

Asking your doctor the following questions can reduce your risk:

- Are there alternative pain treatment options I could use?²
- Can I get a partial-fill prescription of the opioid?²
- What warning signs should I look out for while on this opioid?³
- Where can I get Naloxone (an overdose reverser) in case I take too much?³

How can I safely store opioids?

People who start misusing prescription opioids may get them from their family or friends.² To protect your loved ones, take these steps to safely store prescription opioids:

- Opioids should be stored in their original packaging in a locked or secure location that is out of sight.⁴
- Avoid placing them in medicine cabinets or on kitchen counters or bedside tables.⁴
- Avoid keeping opioids loose in bags or drawers.⁴
- Keep a written record of the number of pills you start out with and how many you use, so if any go missing you will know.⁴
- Never share with or sell your medications to other people, because they may overdose at the same or a lower dosage than you were prescribed.⁵

How do I dispose of prescription opioids?

Best Method: Medication Drop Boxes

- There are places to drop off unused prescriptions at law enforcement agencies in most counties in New York.
- Twice a year, there is a federally sponsored “National Prescription Drug Take Back Day” with additional drop box locations.
- If you can’t quickly find a drop box near you, pick one of the other options below.

For Some Opioids: Flush Down the Toilet

- If you are disposing of opioids with the names fentanyl, hydrocodone, hydromorphone, morphine, meperidine, oxycodone, oxymorphone, buprenorphine, or tapentadol, you can flush the drugs down the toilet.⁷
- To flush a pain/fentanyl patch, as soon as you take it off your skin, fold it in half so the sticky sides touch and flush it.³

Otherwise, Dispose in Household Trash

- Mix uncrushed medicine with water and a substance such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter.³
- Put the mixture into a sealed plastic bag or other container and then place it in another unmarked container. Next throw it in the household trash.³
- Scratch out the information on the label so it cannot be read before throwing out the empty medication packaging.³

SOURCES

1. “How to Use Opioids Safely.” The Mayo Clinic, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 24 Apr. 2019.
2. “Prescription Opioids: Safe Storage and Disposal Training.” Against Opioid Abuse.
3. “Safe Use, Storage, and Disposal of Opioid Drugs.” Family Doctor, American Academy of Family Physicians, 17 June 2019.
4. “Safe Opioid Storage, Tapering, and Disposal.” American Society of Regional Anesthesia and Pain Medicine.
5. “Promote Safe Storage and Disposal of Opioids and All Medications.” American Academy of Family Physicians.