

Medications can help you live better with chronic pain. You may use over-the-counter or prescription medications. It can take some time and adjustment to work out the best treatment plan for you. Work with your doctor to find the best medications for you and to use them safely.

Tell your doctor about ALL medications you're taking, including supplements.

There are four major groups of medications for treatment of chronic pain:

Non-Opioids: These include the commonly used medicine acetaminophen as well as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen or naproxen. They all help control pain but NSAIDs also help relieve inflammation. Some of these are over-the-counter, others are prescription only. None of these are addictive. Acetaminophen can cause liver damage if taken in large quantities. NSAIDs can cause stomach problems and kidney damage. NSAIDs are also not appropriate for patients with certain heart conditions.

Opioids: This includes drugs such as morphine (MS-Contin, Embeda), hydrocodone (Norco, Vicodin), tramadol (Ultram), oxycodone (Oxycontin, Xtampza), codeine, methadone, and others. Opioids are available only by prescription. All of these medications are highly addictive. They all cause sedation, slow reaction times, and clouded reasoning. Opioids tend to become less effective with prolonged use – this is called tolerance. Evidence suggests that they are toxic to cardiac tissues, particularly the cells that create the electrical impulses that make your heart beat.

Adjuvants: This group includes medications that were originally made to treat other conditions but were also found to have pain-relieving properties. Examples of adjuvant drugs include antidepressants, anticonvulsants, and certain blood pressure medications. Most of these medications are highly effective to reduce pain caused by damaged or overly-excited nerves (neuropathic pain). Most are not addictive though they can be sedating. Typically, the sedating effect of these medications only lasts a while and then wears off. Most do not cause organ damage.

Other Pain Medications

- **Topical:** These medications are applied to the skin and absorb. Over the counter formulations include menthol, capsaicin, or both. Prescription formulations may include NSAIDs, adjuvants, numbing agents, or some combination of those. They are typically very effective for joint pain.
- **Muscle Relaxants:** These are used to reduce muscle tension and/or spasm. Older formulations such as carisprodol (Soma) are highly addictive and very sedating. New formulations such as cyclobenzaprine (Flexeril), tizanidine (Zanaflex), or Baclofen are non-addictive, more effective, and much safer.

Medication Safety

- Take your medication as prescribed, don't "Double up" or "Take extra"
- Do NOT take other people's medication. It can be unsafe and is ILLEGAL
- Avoid alcohol, medications can act differently than intended in the presence of alcohol
- Certain combinations of medications, especially opioids with sedatives and/or certain muscle relaxants are known to cause dangerous respiratory depression, respiratory failure, and death. These must be avoided.