

# Protect yourself from opioid misuse

By Matthew Wonnacott

Everyone seems to be talking about opioids lately. The news is alarming: more than 40 Americans die every day from overdoses involving prescription opioids.

It's an issue for people of all ages and backgrounds. Anyone who takes too much of an opioid is at risk. If your doctor prescribes an opioid pain medicine, here's how to avoid a tragic mistake:



Matthew  
Wonnacott

## What are opioids?

Prescription opioids are used to treat moderate to severe pain. They may be taken after an injury or surgery, or for a health condition such as cancer. Examples include:

- Hydrocodone (such as Vicodin)
- Morphine
- Oxycodone (such as OxyContin)

Opioids can cause side effects, such as constipation, nausea, sleepiness, and confusion. In addition, overuse of opioids

could potentially lead to addiction or overdose.

### **Ask about alternatives**

If your doctor prescribes an opioid, talk about the risks and benefits. Ask if there are any alternatives for treating your pain. Options may include other medicines such as prescription-strength ibuprofen or over-the-counter medications, physiatry, physical therapy, or exercise. In some cases, these options can work better than opioids— with less risk.

### **Avoid taking too much**

If you do take an opioid, follow these safety tips:

- Use your medicine exactly as directed. Never take it in larger amounts or more often than prescribed.
- Tell your doctor about any other medicines you're taking. Don't forget over-the-counter and herbal products.
- It can be dangerous to mix opioids with certain drugs, particularly ones that cause drowsiness.
- Have one doctor oversee your opioid treatment. When multiple doctors are writing your prescriptions, the risk of an overdose rises.
- Fill all your prescriptions at one pharmacy, if possible. Your pharmacist can help watch for risky drug interactions.

More than 1,000 Americans end up in emergency rooms every day due to misuse of prescription opioids. A few small steps can have a big impact on your health and safety.

*Matthew Wonnacott is a physician and the medical director at Barton Community Health Center, which provides a variety of care practices including behavioral health services.*