



Opioid Medication: Pain Control after Surgery

What are my options for safe and effective pain control?

Managing your pain after surgery is important. Combination therapy (using different medications together) along with education can offer the best pain relief. Some of these medications work via different pathways and can be used together. After surgery a moderate amount of pain is a normal and expected part of the process. Pain medications help you function better and cope with the amount of pain you are experiencing, but **these medications will not eliminate your pain entirely.**

Talk to your surgeon about medication options, which can include both prescription strength and over the counter drugs. These medications include:

- **Local anesthetics** which can be injected near a set of nerves (nerve block) or the surgery wound site. (This option is performed immediately after your surgery at the hospital).
- **Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)** can be used to decrease swelling and fever, and to treat mild to moderate pain. (These can be prescription or over-the-counter medications, such as Naprosyn, naproxen, Advil, Motrin, Aleve or ibuprofen).
- **Acetaminophen** is used to decrease mild to moderate pain and fever. (These are over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol or Paracetamol).
- **Opioids** are used to decrease severe pain. (These are prescription medications such as Tramacet, Percocet, OxyContin, Vicodin or Tylenol #3 which contains codeine).
- **Nerve pain medication** used to prevent nerve pain and irritation. (These are prescription medications such as Lyrica and Neurontin).

When should I take pain medication?

The goal is to keep you moving and control your pain. In general, the most painful time is the first 72 hours (3 days) after surgery. The amount of pain usually decreases after these first few days. If your pain increases or does not decrease with medication you should contact your surgeon. Call our office at 403-760-2897 (during regular business hours 8am-4pm Monday to Friday), or the Banff Mineral Springs Hospital at 403-762-2222 (outside of business hours).

Some medication is taken on a schedule (for example, every 4-6 hours) and other medications can be taken when you feel pain. Here is a useful guide:

- I am moving slowly and either have no pain or only a little pain = I don't need any medication.
- I am feeling some pain and having trouble moving around = I could use some over-the-counter medication. (For example ibuprofen or acetaminophen).
- I am thinking about my pain all the time and it is painful for me to move = I should take some stronger medication. (For example a prescription medication such as Percocet or Tramacet).

It usually takes 25-40 minutes for the medications to start working effectively so you should take your medication before your pain becomes severe or you are unable to move because of the pain.

Are there ways to reduce my pain besides medication?

Yes! You can do a number of things to help decrease your pain

- Use ice packs or cold therapy to decrease swelling and pain.
- Rest for the majority of time for the first few days after surgery.
- Elevate and support your surgical limb as shown on your rehabilitation exercise protocol.

- Keep moving after the first few days, without over doing it.
- Distraction such as watching movies, listening to music, playing games, or talking to friends and family, has been shown to help reduce pain after surgery.

Why are opioids used?

Opioids are strong medications and when used properly, they can help to relieve short-term pain like the pain experienced after surgery. When opioids are used improperly, they can cause dependence or addiction, overdose and death.

How to use your prescribed opioid medication:

If you have been prescribed an opioid medication, such as Percocet or Tramacet, it should:

- **Only** be taken as prescribed
- **Never** be used by someone for whom it was not prescribed
- **Never** be taken with alcohol or other medications (except as prescribed).
- **Never** to be used while driving or operating machinery

Keep your medication safe to help prevent use by others by:

- **Never** sharing your medication with anyone else. (Sharing opioid medication is illegal and may also cause serious harm or death to the other person).
- **Keeping track** of the number of pills remaining in the package
- **Storing** opioids in a safe and secure place, out of the reach of children and teenagers

Unused portions of opioid medicine should always be:

- Kept out of sight of children and pets
- Stored in a safe place to prevent theft, problematic use or accidental exposure
- **Returned to the pharmacy** for safe disposal when no longer needed or expired. Medications should never be thrown in the trash or flushed down the toilet.
- This will prevent the possibility of illegal use and protect the environment from contamination.

Opioid Side Effects

Short-term side effects	Long-term side effects
Drowsiness	Increased tolerance
Decreased reaction time, which can impair driving and decision-making	Substance use disorder or dependence (addiction)
Constipation	Liver damage
Impotence in men	Infertility in women
Nausea and vomiting	Worsening pain
Difficulty breathing, which can lead to or worsen sleep apnea	Life-threatening withdrawal symptoms in babies born to mothers taking opioids
Euphoria (feeling high)	Overdose
Headaches, dizziness and confusion, which can lead to falls or fractures	

Anyone who takes prescription opioids can become addicted.

If you take opioid medications for more than a few weeks, your body becomes used to that dose. This physical dependence means you may experience withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking the drug.

Withdrawal symptoms include: insomnia, anxiety, racing heartbeat, and headaches. Withdrawal symptoms can be managed by gradually decreasing your medication dose with advice from a health care provider.

Signs of opioid overdose include small pupils, trouble breathing and unconsciousness. Call 911 immediately if you think you or a family member took too much pain medication.



Opioids for pain after surgery: Your questions answered



1. Changes?

You have been prescribed an opioid.

Opioids reduce pain but will not take away all your pain. Ask your prescriber about other methods of reducing pain including using ice, stretching, physiotherapy, or non-opioid drugs like acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Know your pain control plan and work closely with your prescriber if your pain does not improve.



2. Continue?

Opioids are usually required for less than 1 week after surgery.

As you continue to recover from your surgery, your pain should get better day by day. As you get better, you will need less opioids. Consult your healthcare provider about how and when to reduce your dose.



3. Proper Use?

Use the lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time.

Overdose and addiction can occur with opioids. Avoid alcohol and sleeping pills (e.g. benzodiazepines like lorazepam) while taking opioids. Do not drive while taking opioids.



4. Monitor?

Side effects include: sedation, constipation, nausea and dizziness.

Contact your healthcare provider if you have severe dizziness or inability to stay awake.



5. Follow-Up?

Ask your prescriber when your pain should get better.

If your pain is not improving as expected, talk to your healthcare provider.

It is important to:



Never share your opioid medication with anyone else.



Store your opioid medication in a secure place; out of reach and out of sight of children, teens and pets.



Ask about other options available to treat pain.



Take unused medications back to a pharmacy for safe disposal. Talk with your pharmacist if you have questions. For locations that accept returns: [1-844-535-8889](tel:1-844-535-8889) healthsteward.ca

Did you know?



About 16 Canadians are hospitalized each day with opioid poisoning.

— Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2017

Examples of opioids used for pain after surgery:

hydromorphone

morphine

codeine

oxycodone

tramadol

Notes:

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