



Patient education: Managing acute pain at home (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is acute pain?

This means pain that lasts for a short period of time. For example, it can happen after an injury, surgery, or medical or dental procedure. It can be mild, moderate, or severe.

Acute pain is different from chronic pain. "Chronic" means pain that lasts longer than a few months. It can be related to many different conditions, like arthritis, back pain, or nerve pain from diabetes. Chronic pain is managed differently.

How is acute pain treated?

The goal of treatment is to get your pain to a manageable level. It is not always possible to make pain go away completely. Your doctor will work with you to make a plan for treating your pain at home. This will depend on the cause of your pain and how severe it is, as well as your individual situation.

There are different ways to manage pain. Doctors often use more than 1 of these at a time. They include:

- **Non-medicine techniques** – For example, it might help to put ice or heat on the painful part of your body. Resting and keeping the painful part elevated can also help. Some people use relaxation exercises or meditation to help them manage pain.
- **Non-opioid pain medicine** – These include:

- NSAIDs such as [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin) or [naproxen](#) (sample brand name: Aleve)
- [Acetaminophen](#), also known as paracetamol (sample brand name: Tylenol)

Doctors often recommend taking both an NSAID and [acetaminophen](#) on a regular schedule. This can help better control pain. Talk to your doctor about what medicines you should take and how much. People with some medical conditions should not take NSAIDs.

- **Local anesthetics** – These are medicines that numb the painful part of the body. A "nerve block" is when the medicine is injected near certain nerves, which reduces pain in the area. Sometimes, the medicine is given as just 1 shot. Other times, it is given continuously through a small tube called a "catheter." The catheter attaches to a pump that can continue to give medicine after going home from the hospital.
- **Opioids** – Opioids are a group of powerful medicines that relieve pain. They are stronger than pain medicines you can buy without a prescription. But opioids come with risks. For this reason, doctors often try other ways of treating pain first. When opioids are needed to treat severe pain, doctors usually try to prescribe them at the lowest dose that gives relief for the shortest amount of time possible.

What should I know about opioids?

If your doctor prescribes opioids for your pain, there are some things that are important to know:

- Opioids have side effects. For example, if you take too much of an opioid, it can cause serious problems like not breathing enough.
- For treating acute pain, opioids are often prescribed as "immediate-release" pills. These work quickly. They are also available as liquids, suppositories, and shots for people who cannot swallow pills. The table shows different opioids used to treat acute pain ([table 1](#)).
- Doctors usually prescribe the lowest dose possible, for the shortest amount of time possible. This usually means a few days or a week.
- If your doctor prescribes an opioid, they will usually tell you to take an NSAID or [acetaminophen](#) as well. This is to help keep your pain under control so you can use less of the opioid. Some opioids come combined with acetaminophen or an NSAID in the same

pill. If your medicine has both, do **not** take any extra NSAIDs or acetaminophen without talking to your doctor first.

- If you are pregnant, talk with your doctor about your options for treating your pain. There are risks to taking opioids during pregnancy, especially if it is for more than a few days.
- In some cases, taking opioids can lead to misuse or opioid use disorder:
 - "Opioid misuse" means taking an opioid in a way that is different than how your doctor prescribed. An example of misuse is taking the opioid when you do not need it for pain. If you take too much at once, or take opioids with alcohol or certain other drugs, it can cause serious harm or even death from overdose.
 - "Opioid use disorder" is the medical term for when a person can't control their use of the opioid. A person with opioid use disorder might use more medicine than they planned to. They might need higher doses to get the same effect that they used to get with fewer pills or a lower dose. Or they might want to stop or use opioids less often, but not be able to.
- Opioids come with side effects. Some are just bothersome, and some can be dangerous. Information about what side effects to watch for, and when to call the doctor, is below.

There are things you can do to stay safe if you need to take an opioid medicine. These things help protect yourself and others:

- Follow your treatment plan carefully. Take **only** the amount of medicine that your doctor prescribes, and only as often as they tell you to. Different people need different doses. Never take opioids that were not prescribed to you. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you think that your opioids are not helping enough with your pain.
- Do **not** drink alcohol while you are taking opioids.
- Do **not** take opioids with medicines that make you sleepy, unless your doctor tells you to. Examples include "benzodiazepines" like [diazepam](#) (sample brand name: Valium) or [alprazolam](#) (sample brand name: Xanax), muscle relaxants like [baclofen](#) or [cyclobenzaprine](#), or sleeping pills like [zolpidem](#) (sample brand name: Ambien).
- Do **not** drive a car, use dangerous machinery, or do other risky activities while taking an opioid medicine. Opioids can make you feel tired or have trouble thinking clearly.

- Store your opioids in a safe place, such as a locked cabinet. This will prevent children, teens, or anyone else from getting to them.
 - Follow your doctor's instructions about how to stop taking your opioid once your pain has improved. This usually involves reducing the dose gradually. This is called "tapering."
 - When your pain gets better, get rid of any leftover medicines. Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist can suggest ways to get rid of them. This might involve flushing them down the toilet or mixing them with something like dirt or cat litter, then putting the mixture in a sealed container in the trash. Some police stations and pharmacies also take leftover medicines.
 - Try to get all of your pain medicines from the same doctor. If that is not possible, make sure that all of your doctors know **every** medicine you take, even those that are non-prescription. Bring a complete list of all of your pain medicines and other medicines with you whenever you go to a doctor, nurse, dentist, or pharmacist. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is safe to take your other medicines with your pain medicines.
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When should I call for help?

If you are taking an opioid, it's important to be aware of possible side effects and when to get help.

Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**) if you took too much of an opioid medicine or think that someone is having a drug overdose. Signs of an opioid overdose include:

- Extreme sleepiness
- Slow breathing, or no breathing at all
- Very small pupils (the black circles in the center of the eyes)
- Very slow heartbeat

An opioid overdose can be treated with a medicine called "[naloxone](#)." This can save the person's life. But it needs to be given as soon as possible.

Call your doctor or nurse if you have side effects that bother you, such as:

- Constipation – Your doctor or nurse might suggest that you take a laxative to prevent or treat constipation. If your bowel movements are hard and dry, a stool softener might help. Drink plenty of water.

- Mild nausea or stomach discomfort – Taking the medicine with or after food can help with this.
- Nausea, vomiting, or itchiness – If you have any of these problems, your doctor might be able to switch you to a different medicine.
- Dry mouth
- Feeling dizzy or sleepy, or having trouble thinking clearly
- Vision problems
- Being clumsy or falling down

If you suddenly stop taking your opioid after taking it on a regular schedule for several days, you might have unpleasant symptoms, called "withdrawal." These can include a stomach ache, diarrhea, or shakes. Doctors usually recommend reducing your dose gradually to help avoid withdrawal.

Tell your doctor or nurse if you are having trouble managing your pain or have questions about how to take your medicine.

How can I learn more about my medicine?

For more detailed information about your medicines, ask your doctor or nurse for the patient handout from Lexicomp available through UpToDate. It explains how to use each medicine, describes its possible side effects, and lists other medicines or foods that can affect how it works.

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