

Your Health Education

Opioids, Narcotics and Other Pain Medication during Pregnancy

This handout is for pregnant women who have been prescribed a type of pain medicine called an opioid. It is also called a narcotic.

What is an opioid?

Opioids are pain medications only available with prescriptions. You cannot buy them without a prescription. They can be single ingredients or combined with other medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol® is an example of an acetaminophen).

Why are opioids usually prescribed?

Opioids are usually prescribed for pain management for short periods of time.

Important information

Opioids are considered safe medications when ordered by a physician and taken as directed. There are times during pregnancy when opioids are an important and necessary treatment. However, they **do** have some risks:

Combining opioids with alcohol, recreational drugs and some other medications can cause very dangerous effects.

Opioids have side effects:

- Constipation- talk to your doctor about starting a stool softener/increase fiber & water intake if taking the drug for a long period of time.
- Drowsiness (avoid driving and doing other tasks or actions that you must be alert to do until you see how this drug affects you.)
- Decreased respirations or breathing. This can be deadly. The risk is higher if combined with alcohol or drugs for sleep or anxiety. **Respiratory depression caused by accidental overdose is the leading cause of accidental death in women under 50.**

- The longer a person takes an opioid, the more likely he/she is to develop physical tolerance. This means the drug is not as effective for pain relief. In some patients opioids can cause a response where you actually have less tolerance for pain.
- Suddenly stopping opioids, if taken long enough can cause symptoms of withdrawal- nausea, abdominal cramps, restless legs, diarrhea and sweating.

Safety methods when taking prescribed opioids:

- Tell your Obstetrician about all other medications you are taking or have prescriptions for. Never take anyone else's medication or take "old" leftover medication.
- Ask your doctor about the medication and if there are non-narcotic alternative treatments.
- Make sure you understand the directions on how to take the medication.
- Do not take more pain medication than prescribed.
- Do not take sleeping medication, anti-anxiety medication or other pain medications without your doctor's permission.
- Do not drink alcohol or take recreational drugs when taking prescribed opioids
- Do not share your opioid medication with anyone else.
- Keep your opioid medication secure and out of reach of children. Keep track of how many pills are left in the bottle by marking the bottle with remaining pills every time you take one.

- Only take the medication as long as you need it. When you no longer need the medication discard any remaining doses.

Are Opioids safe for the baby?

Opioid (Narcotic) medication passes through your placenta into the baby.

It is generally believed that opioids do not cause birth defects. They do however get into the unborn baby's bloodstream and this exposure can place the baby at risk for developing symptoms of withdrawal known as Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS).

NAS is seen in babies who were exposed to opioids in pregnancy. Babies exposed to prescribed opioids: methadone, buprenorphine or heroin are all at risk for developing NAS.

At Birth

We use a standardized approach at birth to screen infants and monitor for withdrawal signs using a scoring tool. A urine drug screen will be obtained on mother & baby.

If a baby has been exposed to opioids, especially at the end of pregnancy the baby will need to be observed after birth in the hospital for approximately 5-7 days. If the baby has symptoms of withdrawal, the baby may require medication to treat their withdrawal and stay in the hospital for a longer time.

Visitation is flexible- we encourage moms and dads to come as often as they can to participate in their baby's care.