

# THE BASICS

## OxyContin® & Other Opioids

### Do you know?

- Opioids come from opium, which is created from the juice of the unripe seed of the poppy flower.
- Opioids are drugs often prescribed because they are effective at reducing physical pain. They include prescription drugs, such as morphine, codeine, Dilaudid®, Demerol® and a more recently available drug, Oxycontin®.
- OxyContin® is used medically to control medium to severe pain, ongoing pain and pain due to cancer and other serious health conditions. Its popularity has grown because it provides pain relief that lasts for several hours longer than other similar medications.
- If used exactly as it is prescribed, OxyContin® is safe and rarely causes addiction. Currently, hundreds of thousands of Canadians use OxyContin® under medical supervision for pain relief.
- However, abuse of opioid medications such as OxyContin® has grown in recent years. This abuse can have serious health consequences and may lead to addiction. OxyContin® has become one of the most abused prescription drugs in the United States. It is also associated with illegal drug use in Canada.
- OxyContin® abusers either crush the tablet and ingest or snort it, or they dilute it in water and inject it to get high.

### Short-term Effects

When used as prescribed by a doctor, OxyContin® reduces the feeling of physical pain a person is feeling. If OxyContin® is being abused, a person may experience:

- constipation, loss of appetite, sweating.
- nausea, vomiting.
- slight decrease in breathing rate.
- constricted pupils.

- difficulty concentrating.
- relaxation or drowsiness.
- feeling of euphoria (pleasure, well-being, confidence and power).

*Common street names for OxyContin® are "oxy," "O.C.," "oxycotton," "killer," "kicker" and "hillbilly heroin."*

Using the drugs in a way different than prescribed increases the effects experienced.

### Long-term Effects

After heavy use over a long period of time, a person may experience:

- depression, difficulty concentrating and sleeping, and sexual problems.
- serious problems with constipation.
- irregular or disrupted menstrual cycles in women.
- small pains that seem severe when the drug leaves the body because the body stops making natural painkillers.
- agitation, tremors and seizures.
- lower heart rate, blood pressure and breathing.
- disorientation, convulsions and hallucinations.
- possible death following very high doses.

### Tolerance and Dependence

- Regular users of OxyContin® and other opioids can rapidly develop a powerful psychological dependence (they feel they need it) and a physical dependence (the body needs it).
- Tolerance (the need for more of the drug to get the desired effect) can also occur.

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## Withdrawal Symptoms

Withdrawal symptoms can range in severity. Early symptoms can include agitation, anxiety, muscle aches, increased tearing, insomnia, runny nose, sweating and yawning.

More severe symptoms can include abdominal cramping, diarrhea, dilated pupils, goose bumps, nausea and vomiting and intense cravings for the drug.

Opioid withdrawal reactions are not usually life threatening; however, professional supervised care is recommended. If these withdrawal symptoms are being experienced, consult a medical professional immediately.

## Other Risks

- While OxyContin® and other opioid type drugs may be prescribed legally, if they are being used in a way or for purposes other than those they were prescribed for, then that use is illegal. Legal problems can result from having, using, selling and/or stealing the drugs.
- OxyContin®/opioids are expensive when purchased illegally on the street. Financial problems can result from using these drugs illegally.
- OxyContin®/opioids use during pregnancy increases risk of:
  - the fetus dying before the due date.
  - premature birth with low birth weights.
  - stroke and brain damage prior to birth.
  - the fetus becoming infected if a mother uses needles and contracts human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) or hepatitis B or C.
  - a baby born to a woman who used opioids during pregnancy being dependent on the drug. The withdrawal these babies experience after they are born can result in muscle spasms, irritability, high-pitched crying, diarrhea, disturbed sleep and feeding, vomiting, hiccups, stuffy nose, sneezing and breathing problems.
- People can put themselves in risky situations when on these drugs (driving while high, having unprotected sex, taking unsafe actions which could cause injury to themselves or others).

- Sharing needles can lead to infections such as HIV and hepatitis.
- If the user is allergic to opioids, dangerous allergic reactions that could lead to death can occur.

## Substance Use & Mental Health

Substance use and mental health problems can often occur together. This is commonly referred to as a co-occurring disorder.

- Substance use may increase the risk of mental health problems.
- People with mental health problems are at higher risk of developing substance abuse problems:
  - Sometimes they use alcohol and other drugs in an attempt to relieve themselves from mental health symptoms.
  - For most people alcohol and other substance use only covers up the symptoms and may make them worse.

**REMEMBER:** A person's experience with any drug can vary. Here are a few of the many things that may affect the experience: the amount and strength of the drug taken, the setting, a person's mood and expectations before taking the drug, gender, overall health, past experience with that drug and whether more than one drug is being used at the same time. Using alcohol and other drugs at the same time can also be dangerous.

### Sources and For More Information

*Fast Facts on Drugs*, AFM, 2004.

*Opioids, Reward and Addiction: An Encounter of Biology, Psychology, and Medicine*, Jan M. Van Ree, Mirjam A. F. M. Gerrits & Louk J.M.J. Vanderschuren, 1999.

*Health Canada Website*: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)

*MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia* – a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health Website: [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)

*Alberta Health Services Website*:  
[www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca)

*National Institute on Drug Abuse Website*:  
[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

**The Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM)** offers a broad range of prevention and treatment services for alcohol, other drugs and gambling. These are designed to meet the needs of all Manitobans and include harm reduction and abstinence-based programs.

**For more information**, contact your local AFM office or visit the website at [www.afm.mb.ca](http://www.afm.mb.ca).

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