



Why are pain medications used?

Pain medications are prescribed for the treatment of acute (new) pain or injury. Most pain medications are taken for a short period of time, and the pain usually diminishes when the injury has healed.

Unlike acute pain, which responds well to pain medications, chronic pain is more difficult to manage. Relying on medicine alone can be ineffective and frustrating. Therefore, it is best to use a combination of strategies such as appropriate physical exercise, pacing yourself, and relaxation exercises for managing chronic pain.

Medications For Chronic Pain

Pain medications are called *analgesics* and act on the nervous system to reduce pain. They provide only temporary relief because they do not cure the cause of the pain. There are many types of medications that are used in managing pain.

❖ Nonsteroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs

Sometimes called NSAIDs, these drugs have both analgesic and anti-inflammatory properties. They treat mild to moderate pain. They are available over-the-counter as aspirin or ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin), or with a prescription, such as indomethacin (Indocin) and nabumetone (Relafen).

❖ Acetaminophen (APAP)

Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is used to treat mild to moderate pain. It does not have anti-inflammatory properties and is already present in some products (Vicodin and Excedrin). Overdose or excessive use can possibly cause liver problems.

❖ Narcotics/Opiates

These drugs are primarily used to treat acute pain; however, they can be helpful in managing moderate to severe chronic pain. These medications should be used with caution because they can be habit-forming. Medications such as hydrocodone with APAP (Vicodin), oxycodone with APAP (Percocet), morphine (Oramorph), and methadone are narcotics/opiates.

❖ Muscle Relaxants

Muscle relaxants are used to ease muscle tension, but these medications may not be helpful for long-term use. Common muscle relaxants are methocarbamol (Robaxin), cyclobenzaprine (Flexeril), and baclofen. Some muscle relaxants, namely carisoprodol (Soma), disrupt sleep and are addictive; therefore, they are not commonly used.

❖ Benzodiazapines/Sedatives

These are short-term use medications. Long-term use can disrupt sleep and cause other problems. They provide relief from insomnia, anxiety, and panic symptoms. Although they can ease muscle tension, benzodiazapines/sedatives are not recommended. These medications include diazepam (Valium), lorazepam (Ativan), oxazepam (Serax), and alprazolam (Xanax).

❖ Antidepressants

These medications adjust brain chemistry and decrease the transmission of pain messages to the brain. For this reason they are used to manage sleep and pain as well as to treat depression. Generally, these medications take 4 to 6 weeks before you may notice an effect. These medications are not addictive and can be used long-term. Common antidepressant medications used to help with sleep and depression are amitriptyline (Elavil), nortriptyline (Pamelor), and trazodone (Desryl). Other antidepressant medications like fluoxetine (Prozac) and paroxetine (Paxil) are also used to help manage depression that can result from chronic pain.

❖ Antiseizure Medications

These medications adjust spinal and brain chemistry and decrease the transmission of pain messages to the brain. These drugs are not addictive and can be taken long-term. Antiseizure medications include gabapentin (Neurontin), valproic acid (Depakote), and carbamazepine (Tegretol).

Please turn over

The Medication Trap

Problems such as tolerance, physical dependence, and addiction can occur with the long-term use of narcotics/opiates and benzodiazapines. This is sometimes referred to as the *medication trap*.

- **Tolerance** is the need for higher doses of these medications to achieve the same result.
- **Physical dependence** is when unpleasant physical symptoms occur if these medications are stopped abruptly.
- **Addiction** is when a person has cravings or a strong urge to use these medications for their mood-altering effects, despite negative effects.

Pain medications can have long-term side effects and should be used with caution. Long-term side effects can include increased pain, constipation, mental confusion, stomach problems, liver damage, dependency, sexual problems, and depression.

How to take pain medications

- Take medications as prescribed by your physician/nurse practitioner
- Precautions: Never mix pain medications with alcohol or other drugs
- Do not take more or less of the medication prescribed or stop your medications abruptly, unless advised by your physician/nurse practitioner

Before taking pain medications, discuss with your physician/nurse practitioner or pharmacist:

- Risks, benefits, and possible side effects
- All other medications that you are taking, including over-the-counter medications, herbs, and supplements
- Any drug or alcohol problems you have

Your role:

- Clearly understand how to take your medications. If you have any questions, ask your physician, nurse practitioner, or pharmacist.
- Track how these medications affect your pain by keeping a pain diary. Share this information with your prescriber.
- Note side effects you experience and report them to your physician/nurse practitioner.

You may be able to manage your pain without medications. Your physician/nurse practitioner can help you learn about other treatments available for managing chronic pain.

When to call Kaiser Permanente

- You experience medication side effects that concern to you.
- You begin to increase your use of pain medication.
- Your activity level begins to decline.
- You have an increase in depression or anxiety.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical care and information you receive from your physician or health care practitioner. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your physician or other health care practitioner.

Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.

If you have questions or need further information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.