FAST FACTS: Opioid Side Effects

Side effects of common medication pain treatments can limit good pain control, especially in older adults who are physically vulnerable.

✓ General Information:
- Older adults are more sensitive to side effects of medications.
- Side effects should be anticipated when using pain medications.
- Watch for dry mouth, constipation, excessive drowsiness, nausea, disorientation, lack of urine output, or a decline in breathing in and out.
- Work with your loved one’s healthcare provider to prevent and vigorously treat these side effects.
- Opioids, which are prescription pain medications used for the treatment of moderate to severe pain, should start at a low dose and be slowly increased to minimize harmful side effects.
- A routine laxative should be prescribed when opioid treatment is started. Laxative doses should increase when the opioid dose is increased.
- Tolerance is the body’s normal response to continued exposure to a medication resulting in a reduction of the side effect over time. This applies to most opioid side effects, except constipation.
- If side effects last for a long time, speak with your loved one’s healthcare team to discuss treatment options.

✓ Overview of Common Adverse Effects to Opioid Pain Medication:
- Drowsiness and change in cognition (thought, understanding, awareness)
  - This generally improves within 72 hours of starting or increasing an opioid medication
- If drowsiness or decrease in cognitive function persists, report this to your loved one’s healthcare provider who will review the situation.
- Decline in breathing in and out
  - Common fear, but actually very rare when opioids are used for routine persistent pain. Note: changes in respiration at end of life are to be anticipated.
- Disorientation
  - Report to this to your loved one’s healthcare provider to determine cause.
• Nausea
  o Generally resolves within 72 hours of initiating a new pain medication
  o Non-drug treatments include:
    ▪ Lie down
    ▪ Take medication with food
    ▪ Increase circulating air
    ▪ Place a cool towel on head/neck
    ▪ Do not eat foods at extreme temperatures
    ▪ Avoid spices in foods
    ▪ Avoid strong odors

• Constipation
  o The healthcare provider should prescribe medication to combat constipation along with opioid pain medications.
  o Take medications for constipation as prescribed.
  o If constipation persists, report to the healthcare provider, who will increase dose as needed.

• Involuntary muscle twitching
  o Can occur with high doses of opioid therapy
  o Report to the healthcare provider

• Itching
  o Can occur with high-dose opioid therapy.
  o This is most common with morphine but can occur with other opioids. For most people, itching is a side effect, not an allergy.
  o Report to the healthcare provider.
  o Antihistamines are a common medication used for itching.
  o Your loved one may also benefit from cool compresses and/or moisturizers to soothe the itching.

✓ What Else You Should Do
• Report all information about adverse effects to their healthcare provider.
• Encourage your loved one to use a Pain Diary to note important information (such as side effects) useful to the provider.

References