FAST FACTS: Opioid Side Effects

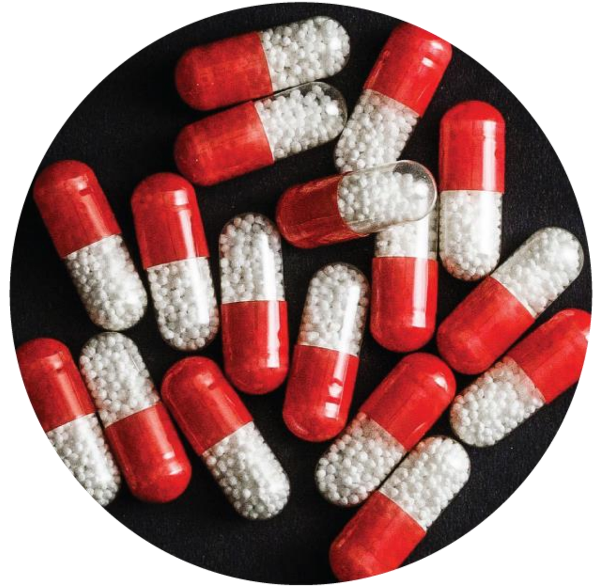
Side effects of common medication pain treatments can be a deterrent to good pain control --- especially with older adults who are physically vulnerable.

✓ **General Information:**

- Older adults are more sensitive to side effects, also called adverse effects (AE).
- You should anticipate adverse effects when using pain medications.
- Watch for dry mouth, constipation, sedation (i.e. excessive drowsiness), nausea, delirium (i.e. restlessness, illusions, and incoherence of thought and speech), urinary retention, and respiratory depression.
- Work with your loved one’s Healthcare provider to prevent and vigorously treat adverse effects.
- Opioids, 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 like sedation and delirium.
- When starting on an opioid treatment the patient should also be prescribed a routine laxative and the dose of laxative should be increased as the dose of opioid is increased.
- Tolerance, the body's normal response to continued exposure to a medication resulting in a reduction of the side effect over time, can develop to most of the adverse effects of opioids, except constipation.
- Prolonged side effects should be proactively treated with further medication management to counter medication-related adverse effects.

✓ **Overview of common Adverse Effects to pain medication:**

- Drowsiness and change in cognition (i.e. thought, understanding, awareness).
    - This generally improves within 72 hours of starting or increasing an opioid medication.
    - If drowsiness/decrease in cognitive function persists, ensure it is reported to Healthcare team who should review situation.



- Respiratory Depression
  - Common fear, but actually very rare when opioids are used for routine persistent pain. Note changes in respirations at end of life are to be anticipated.
- Delirium
  - Report to Healthcare provider to determine cause – physical issue vs drug effect.
- Nausea
  - This generally resolves within 72 hours of initiating new pain medication.
  - Non-pharmacological treatments include:
    - Lie down
    - Take medication with food
    - Increase circulating air
    - Place a cool towel on head/neck
    - Don't eat foods at extreme temperatures
    - Avoid spices in foods
    - Avoid strong odors
  - If you are constipated report this to your healthcare provider.
- Constipation
  - Your healthcare provider should prescribe medication to combat constipation along with opioid pain medications.
  - Take medications for constipation as prescribed.
  - If constipation persists, report to your healthcare provider, who will increase dose as needed.
- Involuntary muscle twitching (Called: Myoclonus)
  - Can occur with high-doses opioid therapy.
  - Report to your healthcare provider.
- Itching (Called: Pruritus)
  - Can occur with high-does opioid therapy.
  - This is most common with morphine but can occur with other opioids. For most people, itching is a side effect, not an allergy- discuss with your healthcare provider.
  - Report to your healthcare provider.
  - Antihistamines are a common medication used for itching.
  - You may also benefit from cool compresses and/or moisturizers to sooth the itching.

✓ **What else the Caregiver should do:**

- Report all information about your adverse effects to your healthcare provider.
- Consider using a Pain Diary to note important information (should as adverse effects) useful to the provider.

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References

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