

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
 - Generally resolves within 72 hours of initiating a new pain medication
 - 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
 - The healthcare provider should prescribe medication to combat constipation along with opioid pain medications
 - Take medications for constipation as prescribed
 - If constipation persists, report to the healthcare provider, who will increase dose as needed
- Involuntary muscle twitching
 - Can occur with high doses of opioid therapy
 - Report to the healthcare provider
- Itching
 - Can occur with high-doses 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.
 - Report to the healthcare provider
 - Antihistamines are a common medication used for itching
 - Your loved one may also benefit from cool compresses and/or moisturizers to sooth 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:

1. Used with permission of K. Herr, PI, Cancer Pain in Elders: Promoting EBP's in Hospices; NCI Grant R01CA115363; Adapted from AHRQ Grant RO1 HS 10482; M. Titler; PI; Revised 2/7/07.
2. Reuben DB, Herr KA, Pacala JT, et al. Geriatrics At Your Fingertips: 2021, 23rd Edition. New York: The American Geriatrics Society; 2021.

Revised January 2022