

Quality Standards

Patient Reference Guide



Opioid Prescribing for Acute Pain

Care for People 15 Years of Age and Older

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DRAFT

**Health Quality
Ontario**

Let's make our health system healthier

Quality standards outline what high-quality care looks like. They focus on conditions where there are large variations in how care is delivered, or where there are gaps between the care provided in Ontario and the care patients should receive.

This guide addresses areas of opioid prescribing for acute pain that need attention in our province. It is based on the best available evidence from clinical practice guidelines and was created in partnership with people who have experienced acute pain, their caregivers, and health care providers.

This guide is for people with acute pain and their caregivers—to know what to ask for when receiving treatment and to ensure you receive the highest quality care.

Acute pain is a normal response to things like a cut, a broken bone, a kidney stone, or surgery. Sometimes, acute pain has no obvious cause, like with migraine headaches. Acute pain comes on fast and goes away in no more than a few days or weeks.

Acute pain can be mild and easily tolerated. Or, it can be severe and completely disabling. It can also be anywhere in between these two extremes.

There are many ways to treat acute pain; for example, rest, ice, physical therapies, and several types of medications.

Opioid medications, such as codeine, fentanyl, hydrocodone, morphine, and oxycodone, should not be the first choice of treatment because of their serious risks, including addiction, overdose, and death. However, they can be a good option when used appropriately.

If you or someone you care about has been prescribed or is considering opioids for acute pain...

You can use this guide to work in partnership with your health care professionals to develop a care plan that works for you and that lowers your risk of being harmed by opioids.

Use this information to learn what high-quality care looks like for acute pain, to ask informed questions about opioids that may be prescribed, and to learn about other types of care that may help.

What to Discuss With Your Health Care Professional

Assessing Acute Pain

- Before prescribing opioids, your health care professional should give you a physical examination and ask about your physical and mental health, your medical history, any other medications you are taking, and how you responded to treatment for pain in the past.

Alternatives to Opioid Medications

- You should be offered a variety of ways to manage your pain, including different kinds of physical therapies and medications, depending on the cause of your pain.
- You should be offered opioids only when other types of treatment are unable to manage your pain.

Starting and Stopping Opioid Medications

- Your health care professional should explain the potential benefits and harms of opioid therapy for acute pain so that you can make decisions about your care together. If you have family or others involved in your care, they should also receive this information. Potential harms of opioid therapy include addiction and overdose.
- If you currently have a drug or alcohol addiction or a mental illness, or if you had a drug or alcohol addiction in the past, the risks of harm from opioids are higher, and you should discuss these risks with your health care professional.
- To make sure you receive the safest treatment, your health care professional and pharmacist will check your prescription history before prescribing or dispensing opioids. They do this to see if you have recently been given opioids or other medications that are dangerous to combine with opioids, such as benzodiazepines (for example, alprazolam, diazepam, or lorazepam).
- If opioids are prescribed for your acute pain, your prescription should be for the lowest dose and lowest strength that will work. In most cases, your prescription should be for 3 days or less.
- If you take opioids for more than a few days and then cut down or stop quickly, you may experience uncomfortable physical symptoms such as diarrhea, insomnia, muscle aches, nausea, and vomiting. Your health care professional will work with you to develop a plan to minimize uncomfortable symptoms when reducing and stopping your use of opioids.

If You Are Already Taking Opioids

- If you are already taking opioids (perhaps because of chronic pain) and you are now experiencing acute pain, your dose should be adjusted to treat the acute pain, and your health care professional should discuss the benefits and risks of this dose adjustment with you. Your health care professional should also work with you to make a plan to safely return to your regular dose when the acute pain is over.
- If you take buprenorphine/naloxone or methadone for opioid addiction, you should continue to take this medication during times when you are being treated for acute pain.

Draft—do not cite. Report is a work in progress and could change following public consultation.

Everybody is different, and some statements may not apply in your situation. If you have questions about your care, **it is important to speak with your health care professional.**

Looking for more information?

Please contact us at qualitystandards@hqontario.ca if you have any questions or feedback about this patient reference guide.

A more detailed version of this quality standard, written for health care professionals, is available on our website. You can find it at hqontario.ca.

About Health Quality Ontario

Health Quality Ontario is the provincial advisor on the quality of health care. We are motivated by a single-minded purpose: **Better health for all Ontarians.**

Our quality standards are concise sets of statements outlining what quality care looks like for conditions where there are large variations in how care is delivered, or where there are gaps between the care provided in Ontario and the care patients should receive. They are based on the best available evidence and are developed in collaboration with clinical experts from across the province and patients and caregivers with lived experience with the condition being discussed.

For more information about Health Quality Ontario and our quality standards, visit: **hqontario.ca**.

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