

Patient Reference Guide

Opioid Prescribing for Chronic Pain

Care for People 15 Years
of Age and Older





Quality standards outline what high-quality care looks like. They focus on conditions or topics 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 chronic pain that need attention in our province. It is based on the best available evidence and was created in partnership with people who have experienced chronic pain and health care professionals.

The quality standard, available on our website, contains more information. You can find it at [hqontario.ca](https://www.hqontario.ca).

In this guide, we use the following term:

- **Family:** Family members, friends, or other supportive people not necessarily related to you.

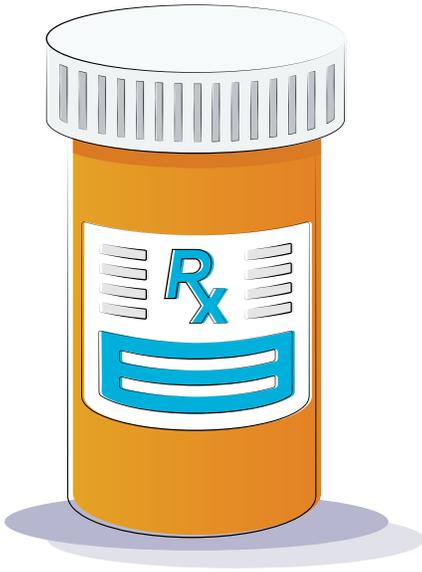
This guide is for people with chronic pain and their families. It can help you know what to ask for when receiving treatment and to make sure you receive the highest-quality care.

Chronic pain is pain that lasts for a long time, usually for more than 3 months. There are many different conditions that can cause chronic pain. Two of the most common are arthritis and lower back pain, but there are also many others.

Living with chronic pain can be difficult, but there are many types of treatment available, including non-medication treatments and cultural or spiritual practices. Your health care professional should tell you about all the types of treatment available so you can decide together which ones might be most effective for your pain.

Opioid medications, such as codeine, fentanyl, hydromorphone, morphine, oxycodone, and tramadol, should not be the first choice for treatment because of their serious risks, which include addiction, overdose, and death. Treatments that do not involve opioid medications should be tried first.





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

You can use this guide to work with your health care professional to make a care plan that works for you, including access to culturally appropriate care. Use this information to learn what high-quality care looks like for chronic pain, to ask informed questions about opioids that may be prescribed, and to learn about other types of care that may help.

Care plans can be very different for each person, so it is important to work closely with your health care professional.

Here are some things to consider.

Before Starting Opioid Medications

Assessing Chronic Pain and Setting Goals

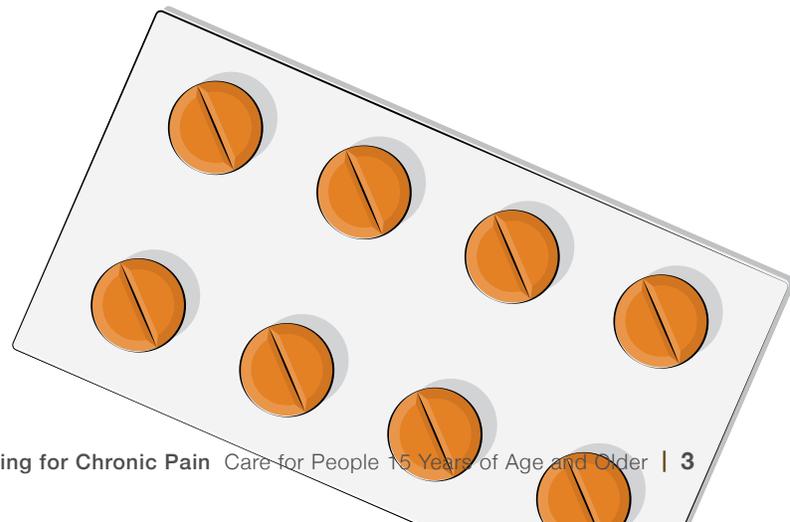
- Your health care professional should ask you about your pain, your health, your ability to function at work and at home, and any other issues that may be affecting your health.
- Your health care professional should work with you to set goals for managing your pain. This conversation should focus on goals that matter to you, including reducing your pain and improving your ability to function at work and at home.

Alternatives to Opioid Medications

- A combination of physical therapies, psychological therapies, and non-opioid medications is the first choice for treating chronic pain. Your health care professional should offer you different combinations of these therapies before offering opioids.

Starting and Stopping Opioid Medications

- Your health care professional should explain the potential benefits and harms of opioid medications for chronic pain so that you can make decisions about your care together. If you have family involved in your care, they should also receive this information.
- Potential harms of opioid therapy include uncomfortable physical symptoms when you stop taking the medication, addiction, and overdose.
- If you currently have a drug or alcohol addiction or if you did in the past, or if you currently have a mental health condition, the risk of becoming addicted to opioids or overdosing is higher. Your health care professional should discuss these risks with you.
- To make sure you get the safest, most effective treatment, your health care professional and pharmacist should check your prescription history before prescribing or giving you opioids. They do this to see if you have recently been given opioids or other medications that are dangerous to take with opioids.
- If you and your health care professional decide that treatment with opioids is right for you, your starting dose should be as low as possible to improve your pain and ability to function.
- Your health care professional should monitor your use of opioids carefully and help you stay on the lowest possible dose.
- Whenever possible, you should not take opioids and benzodiazepines at the same time. Benzodiazepines include medications like lorazepam, diazepam, and alprazolam. Taking opioids and benzodiazepines together can cause serious breathing problems.
- There is a risk of becoming addicted to opioids. If you are taking your opioids more often or in higher doses than prescribed, or if you feel that opioids are having a negative impact on your life, talk with your health care professional. Your health care professional should not judge you. They should treat you with care and respect.
- When your pharmacist gives you opioids, they should explain to you how to safely store your medication and how to safely dispose of any unused medication you no longer need.





- Your health care professional should talk with you about cutting down or stopping your opioid medication when:
 - You have been taking opioids for 3 months or longer
 - Your pain is not getting better
 - You are having problematic side effects
 - You are on a high dose of opioids
 - You want to cut down or stop taking opioids
- Cutting down or stopping your opioid medication may have benefits for you, including lowering your risk of overdose and improving your pain.
- But, cutting down or stopping opioids can be difficult. Your health care professional should work with you to make this decision together.

- If you cut down or stop too quickly, you may experience uncomfortable physical symptoms such as trouble sleeping, muscle aches, diarrhea, upset stomach, and vomiting. Your health care professional will work with you to make a plan to help you cut down or stop taking opioids safely.
- When you are cutting down, you might find it helpful to try other ways to manage your pain, like physical therapies, psychological therapies, or cultural or spiritual practices that are important to you.

Living with chronic pain can be difficult, but many types of treatment are available, including ones that don't involve medication.

Your health care professional will work with you to find the best type of treatment to help you reach your pain management goals.

Everybody is different, and some options 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 or **1-866-623-6868** if you have any questions or feedback about this patient reference guide.

The quality standard, available on our website, contains more information. 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 or topics 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 topic being discussed.

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