

# Narcotic Abuse and Dependence

## What is narcotic abuse and dependence?

Narcotics are drugs that dull the sense of pain and cause drowsiness or sleep. They are often prescribed to relieve pain. Narcotics are also sold illegally.

Examples of narcotics are:

- Codeine
- Heroin
- Hydrocodone (Vicodin)
- Morphine
- Oxycodone (Percocet, OxyContin)

Abuse and dependence are patterns of using drugs that lead to serious personal, family and health problems. Abuse is when you keep taking the drug even though it causes a problem such as:

- Showing up late or missing work or school and not caring about things that used to matter to you
- Breaking rules or breaking the law
- Not keeping promises, arguing, or even getting violent with other people
- Doing things that are dangerous, such as driving while under the influence

You may also be abusing prescription narcotics if you:

- Take them for reasons other than why they were prescribed
- Take more than the prescribed dose
- Continue to use them when you no longer have pain

If you continue to abuse drugs, you can become dependent. When you are dependent on narcotics, you:

- Need to use more and more of the drug, or use it more often to get the same effects
- Lose control, which means you keep using drugs even though you know that it is harmful to you or others, or you can't stop using narcotics when you try
- Crave drugs so much that you spend a lot of time and energy getting drugs, using drugs, and getting over the effects
- Have withdrawal symptoms when you stop using narcotics

Dependence is also called addiction. Not everyone who uses prescription narcotic pain medicine will become addicted. However, it is very easy to get addicted to these types of medicine. Illegal narcotics like heroin are very addicting and very dangerous.

## **What is the cause?**

Narcotics change the way your body and brain work. When you use narcotics, your brain starts to get used to them. As a result, you think about narcotics all the time, you don't feel good unless you use narcotics, and you may act different when you use them. When you stop using narcotics suddenly, the balance of chemicals in your brain changes which causes the symptoms of withdrawal.

You have a higher risk of becoming dependent on drugs if you:

- Have a family history of drug or alcohol abuse
- Have abused alcohol or drugs in the past
- Are easily frustrated, have trouble dealing with stress, or feel like you aren't good enough
- Are regularly around people who use alcohol or drugs
- Have a mental health problem
- Have constant pain

## **What are the symptoms?**

The symptoms of narcotic abuse or dependence depend on how much and how often you use the drug. The symptoms can be mild to severe, such as:

- Sleepiness
- Constipation
- Slowed breathing, which can lead to death

The symptoms of narcotic withdrawal can be mild to severe. You may have some of these symptoms when you stop using narcotic:

- Nervousness and restlessness
- Muscle and bone pain
- Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea
- Cravings for narcotics
- Sleep problems
- Jerky leg movement that you can't control

## **How is it diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider will ask how much and how often you use narcotics. Be honest about your drug use. Your provider needs this information to give you the right treatment. He will also ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. You may have blood or urine tests.

## **How is it treated?**

Narcotic abuse and dependence can be treated. For any treatment to be successful, you must want to stop using narcotics. Do not try to use alcohol and other drugs to reduce withdrawal symptoms.

Stopping narcotics should be done slowly. It may take days or months. Your healthcare provider will watch you closely and slowly reduce the amount you take during this time. Your healthcare provider may prescribe medicine to help you get through withdrawal. Your healthcare provider may prescribe a medicine that blocks the feelings of pleasure that narcotics give you. Other medicines may be prescribed to block cravings for narcotics. These medicines often work best when used while you are in therapy and in a support group.

If you are abusing or dependent on narcotics and want to quit, get help.

Self-help groups such as Narcotics Anonymous, support groups, and therapy may be helpful. You might be treated in a substance abuse treatment program. Your healthcare providers and counselors will work with you to develop a treatment program.

Recovery from dependence is a long-term process. Follow-up treatment is very important so that you don't go back to abusing drugs.

If you have overdosed, or are having severe withdrawal symptoms you will need to be treated in a hospital. You will also be treated for any health problems such as a heart attack, stroke, or other life-threatening problems.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

The best way to help yourself is to see your healthcare provider and make plans to stop taking narcotics. If you are already seeing a healthcare provider, it is important to take the full course of treatment he or she prescribes.

**Get support.** Talk with family and friends. Consider joining a support group in your area.

**Learn to manage stress.** Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax, for example take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.

**Take care of your physical health.** Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Don't use alcohol or drugs. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.

**Avoid situations where people are likely to use alcohol or drugs.**

**Check your medicines.** To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take.

**Contact your healthcare provider or therapist** if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

**Keep trying.** Many people try more than once to quit using narcotics before they finally succeed. So, never say, "I can't." You CAN learn to live without drugs in your daily life.

People and resources in your community that can help you include your healthcare providers, therapists, support groups, mental health centers, and alcohol or substance abuse treatment programs. You may want to contact:

- Narcotics Anonymous  
818-773-9999  
<http://www.na.org>

Developed by RelayHealth.

*This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.*