
How Healthcare Providers Can Help End the Over-Prescription of Opioids



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More than 115 Americans die every day from opioid overdose, according to the [National Vital Statistics System](#). Prescription painkillers are at the root of this epidemic, and healthcare providers can help make a dent in these alarmingly fatal statistics.

Opioid prescription rates

In the 90s, doctors began prescribing opioids to manage chronic pain, such as arthritis. When a patient takes opioids for chronic pain, their tolerance will naturally increase over time. So, doctors prescribed opioids at higher doses for these patients.

We've also seen evidence of reckless opioid prescribing post-surgery. A 2017 Michigan Medicine [study](#) found that about 1 in 16 patients who were prescribed opioid pain relievers were still getting the drugs three to six months later.

Opioid prescriptions reached an all-time high in 2010. Fortunately, we've seen these rates decline each year since. Many are to blame for our current [addiction epidemic](#), but there's something we can all do to help end the over-prescription of opioids.

Responsible prescribing

It's no secret that opioids are addictive. As such, prescription painkillers should be prescribed with caution. Doctors can take the following steps to ensure they are prescribing responsibly:

- Avoid prescribing opioids for chronic pain – Try finding alternatives to opioids if the patient suffers from chronic pain, regardless of whether the chronic pain is the reason for the prescription. One example would be if someone with fibromyalgia has a painful dental procedure. In this case, the fibromyalgia pain relief they experience from the prescription painkillers may tempt the patient to take the pills more often than they should.
- Investigate addiction history – Asking about personal and family histories of addiction may help doctors decide whether a patient may be at risk for abusing their prescription. Patients with a family history of addiction are more likely to become addicts themselves. Although patients may not always be honest, this step may help may a small impact.
- Experiment with prescribing alternatives – [Medical marijuana](#) has been shown to have pain relieving qualities and may help patients avoid taking opioids altogether. Other opioid alternatives include NSAIDs, acetaminophen, and corticosteroids. Pain is a very subjective thing, and it's impossible to say which pain reliever would be effective for a specific patient without some experimenting. By trying other pain-relieving methods first, patients may find that opioids are unnecessary.
- Limit the duration of use – When healthcare professionals prescribe opioids for acute pain, they should only prescribe enough to help the patient get through the worst of it. In the case of surgery, this may be a few days or up to a week. Patients will need to see their healthcare provider again for a refill, and refills can only be given in extreme cases.
- Educate patients – Whenever a doctor prescribes opioids, he or she should discuss the dangers of addiction with their patients. These

should be somewhat in-depth conversations that link prescription painkillers to the opioid epidemic.

Healthcare providers can do a lot to help end the over-prescription of opioids. It won't end our current crisis, but it will reduce the number of people who become addicted in the future.

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