

Choosing Wisely®

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American
Urological
Association

Using opioids safely after surgery

Stick to the lowest dose for as few days as possible

Opioids are powerful drugs that decrease pain, but they can also lead to addiction and deadly overdose if not taken with care. If you need opioids after surgery, it is important to talk to your doctor about how to use them safely.

Talk to your doctor before surgery.

If you're having urological surgery—such as surgery for prostate cancer or to remove a kidney stone—you will have a doctor's appointment before the surgery. This is sometimes called a “pre-op” appointment. This is when you and your doctor should talk about how you will feel after surgery and whether or not you will need opioid pain medicine.

If your doctor says opioids aren't necessary.

If your doctor thinks you won't be in a lot of pain after surgery, other types of pain medicine may be needed. He or she may recommend over-the-counter pain relievers like acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, and generic), and naproxen (Aleve and generic).



If your doctor says opioids are necessary.

If your doctor thinks you will be in a lot of pain after surgery, opioids might be the right choice. Opioids include hydrocodone (Vicodin and generic) and oxycodone (OxyContin, Percocet, and generic). These medicines should only be used to treat extreme short-term pain, like the kind you may feel after surgery.

During your pre-op appointment, you and your doctor should also talk about all the medicines and supplements you already take and how much alcohol you drink. This will help make sure that you are taking any pain medicine safely.

Stick to the lowest dose.

If you need opioids, your doctor should prescribe the lowest possible dose. Three days or fewer will often be enough and more than seven days are only rarely needed for urology procedures. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, taking opioids for more than three days will increase your risk of addiction. If you're still in pain after three days, use over-the-counter medicines as recommended by your doctor. Your doctor or pharmacist can help you take those medicines safely. They may also suggest non-drug ways to ease your pain, such as heat or cold therapy.

Know the risks and side effects.

- The risk of overdose with opioids is high because the amount that can cause an overdose is not much higher than the amount used to treat pain.
- The risk of addiction is low, but it can happen to anyone. Ask your doctor about this risk.
- The possible side effects of opioids include abdominal cramps, constipation, headaches, nausea, sleepiness, vomiting, and a fuzzyheaded feeling.

Don't take opioids for long-term pain.

Urologists also treat people who have painful conditions that do not require surgery, such as recurring kidney stones. Opioids should not be used to treat conditions that involve long-term pain. If you see a urologist for conditions like these, ask about other ways to manage your pain. You can also ask to be referred to a pain management specialist.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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