

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

The Shocking Truth About Back Pain Prescription Drugs

It seems that every few months a news scandal erupts about a celebrity who developed an addiction to painkillers after being prescribed the drugs for back pain. Yet, despite this media attention, use of opioid drugs for back pain continues to climb unabated. And, it's not just celebrities who are affected.

If you or somebody you know is taking an opioid medication — or considering taking one — Dr. Smith urges you to get educated about these medications, and to focus on all-natural solutions first.

What Are Opioids?

Fueled by massive marketing campaigns orchestrated by the pharmaceutical industry, the use of prescription opioids quadrupled between 1999 and 2010. And, they continue to rise. Specifically, sales of these highly addictive drugs jumped from \$5.8 billion in 2006 to \$8.4 billion in 2011.

Many people who are prescribed an opioid don't realize what exactly they are taking. Opioids are powerful narcotics. They are often morphine, or a derivative of the drug, marketed under a brand name. Opioids were traditionally produced from the resin of the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). This is the same substance used to make heroin.

These days, opioid medications are synthetically manufactured by pharmaceutical companies. Common brand names of opioids prescribed for back pain include OxyContin, Percocet and Vicodin. However, there is a long list of other opioid brand names.



Some medications combine an opioid with another non-narcotic drug, such as aspirin or acetaminophen. So, it may be confusing to determine simply from the medication's name if it contains opioids. That's one reason why it is essential to be absolutely certain what class of drugs you are prescribed before considering taking it.

If you are concerned whether or not a specific medication is an opioid, Dr. Smith is happy to help you look it up.

A Growing Danger

According to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one person dies every 19 minutes from an unintentional drug overdose. Since 2003, more overdose deaths have involved opioid painkilling medication than heroin and cocaine combined.

“Prescription drug abuse is the fastest growing drug problem in the United States. The increase in unintentional drug overdose death rates in recent years has been driven by increased use of a class of prescription drugs called opioid analgesics.” (MMWR 2012;61:10-13.)



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Opioids may also confer a multitude of potential side effects, the most common of which are constipation, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, sedation, difficulty breathing and addiction or drug abuse. In addition, opioid use is linked with gastrointestinal problems, liver disease, muscular rigidity, hormonal disturbances and other maladies.



Addiction Risk

Opioids can be highly addictive, especially in patients with a history of drug or alcohol dependency, anxiety, depression or mental illness.

According to the CDC, “For every unintentional overdose death related to an opioid analgesic, nine persons are admitted for substance abuse treatment, 35 visit emergency departments, 161 report drug abuse or dependence, and 461 report nonmedical uses of opioid analgesics.” (*MMWR* 2012;61:10-13.)

A whopping 35 percent of patients who take prescription opioids will develop an addiction or abuse problem, according to researchers at the Center for Health Research in Danville, PA, who pooled data on 705 patients with non-cancer related pain, including chronic back pain (*J Addict Dis* 2011;30:185-94).

It’s worth noting that this estimation does not take into account the throngs of people with back pain who obtain opioids illegally. These individuals are likely to have an even higher risk of addiction.

Opioids Change the Brain

Here’s yet another reason to be cautious of opioids for back pain: they may rapidly — and perhaps permanently — change your brain, according to a recent study.

As part of the study, 10 individuals with chronic low back pain were administered oral morphine daily for one month. Magnetic resonance images of their brains were acquired immediately before and after treatment.

Results revealed that 13 key brain regions exhibited significant changes. These brain regions process goal-directed actions and the anticipation of rewards, or pleasure. The brain changes detected suggest that opioids may weaken these crucial mental pathways (*Pain* 2011;152:1803-10).

“Follow-up scans that were conducted an average of 4.7 months after cessation of opioids demonstrated many of the morphine-induced changes to be persistent.”

The study’s authors note that these brain alterations did not occur in patients taking placebo. “In a separate study, nine individuals consuming blinded placebo capsules for six weeks evidenced no significant morphologic changes over time.”

“The results add to a growing body of literature showing that opioid exposure causes structural and functional changes in reward- and affect-processing [brain] circuitry,” write the study’s authors. “Morphologic changes occur rapidly in humans during new exposure to prescription opioid analgesics.” (*Pain* 2011;152:1803-10.)

The Cover Up

Painkillers, including opioids, merely mask pain. They fail to address the underlying root cause. In turn, the true source may proliferate. Because it is “covered up” by painkillers, the real cause remains unchecked. The end result is often the development of a more difficult to treat — and more painful condition — down the road.

Try Chiropractic First

Unlike painkillers, chiropractic seeks to uncover the root cause of back pain, and focuses on correcting it. Quite often, back pain is triggered by dysfunctional areas in the spine called **vertebral subluxations**. This common condition is characterized by spinal bones (vertebrae) that are restricted or slightly out of alignment.

A chiropractic evaluation involves collecting a thorough patient history and examination. If vertebral subluxations are found, the doctor corrects them with gentle and effective maneuvers called **chiropractic adjustments**. This prevention-oriented approach not only ends current back pain, but also keeps it from recurring.

And research shows chiropractic provides as much relief as pain medication. What’s more, chiropractic has none of the possible side effects of painkillers.

One massive review study published by the Cochrane Library confirms that chiropractic is as effective as common medical interventions, such as painkiller medication, for chronic low back pain. The study also concludes that chiropractic is safe.

The review authors looked at 26 randomized controlled studies on spinal manipulative therapy including a total of 6,070 participants (*Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2011;Epub).

Call Our Office Today

If you would like to learn more about natural alternatives to prescription back pain medications, please call our office today!

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