

# What to know about being given opioids after surgery to take at home

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Opioids are commonly prescribed when you're discharged from hospital after surgery to help manage pain at home.

These strong painkillers may have unwanted side effects or harms, such as constipation, drowsiness or the risk of dependence.

However, there are steps you can take to minimize those harms and use [opioids](#) more safely as you recover from [surgery](#).

## **Which types of opioids are most common?**

The [most commonly prescribed](#) opioids after surgery in Australia are oxycodone ([brand names](#) include Endone, OxyNorm) and tapentadol (Palexia).

In fact, [about half](#) of new oxycodone prescriptions in Australia occur after a recent hospital visit.

[Most commonly](#), people will be given immediate-release opioids for their pain. These are quick-acting and are used to manage short-term pain.

Because they work quickly, their dose can be easily adjusted to manage current pain levels. Your doctor will provide instructions on how to adjust the dosage based on your pain levels.

Then there are slow-release opioids, which are specially formulated to slowly release the dose over about half to a full day. These may have "sustained-release," "controlled-release" or "extended-release" on the box.

Slow-release formulations are primarily used for chronic or long-term pain. The slow-release form means the medicine does not have to be taken as often. However, it takes longer to have an effect compared with immediate-release, so it is not commonly used after surgery.

Controlling your pain after surgery is [important](#). This allows you to get up and start moving sooner, and recover faster. Moving around sooner after surgery prevents muscle wasting and harms associated with immobility, such as bed sores and blood clots.

Everyone's pain levels and needs for pain medicines are different. Pain levels also decrease as your surgical wound heals, so you may need to take less of your medicine as you recover.

## **But there are also risks**

As mentioned above, side effects of opioids include constipation and feeling drowsy or nauseous. The drowsiness can also make you more likely to fall over.

Opioids prescribed to manage pain at home after surgery are usually prescribed for short-term use.

But up to [one in ten](#) Australians still take them up to four months after surgery. [One study](#) found that people didn't know how to safely stop taking opioids.

Such long-term opioid use may lead to dependence and overdose. It can also reduce the medicine's effectiveness. That's because your body becomes used to the opioid and needs more of it to have the same effect.

Dependency and side effects are also more common with [slow-release opioids](#) than immediate-release opioids. This is because people are usually on slow-release opioids for longer.

Then there are concerns about "leftover" opioids. One study found 40% of participants were prescribed [more than twice](#) the amount they needed.

This results in unused opioids at home, which [can be dangerous](#) to the person and their family. Storing leftover opioids at home increases the risk of taking too much, sharing with others inappropriately, and using without doctor supervision.

## How to minimize the risks

Before using opioids, speak to your doctor or pharmacist about using over-the-counter pain medicines such as paracetamol or anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen (for example, Nurofen, Brufen) or diclofenac (for example, Voltaren, Fenac).

These can be quite effective at controlling pain and will lessen your need for opioids. They can often be used instead of opioids, but in some cases a combination of both is needed.

Other techniques to manage pain include physiotherapy, exercise, heat packs or ice packs. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist to discuss which techniques would benefit you the most.

However, if you do need opioids, there are some ways to make sure you use them [safely and effectively](#):

- ask for [immediate-release](#) rather than slow-release opioids to lower your risk of side effects
- do not drink alcohol or take sleeping tablets while on opioids. This can increase any drowsiness, and lead to reduced alertness and slower breathing
- as you may be at higher risk of falls, remove trip hazards from your home and make sure you can safely get up off the sofa or bed and to the bathroom or kitchen
- before starting opioids, have a plan in place with your doctor or pharmacist about how and when to stop taking them. Opioids

after surgery are ideally taken at the lowest possible dose for the shortest length of time.

## **If you're concerned about side effects**

If you are concerned about [side effects](#) while taking opioids, speak to your pharmacist or doctor. Side effects include:

- constipation—your pharmacist will be able to give you lifestyle advice and recommend laxatives
- drowsiness—do not drive or operate heavy machinery. If you're trying to stay awake during the day, but keep falling asleep, your dose may be too high and you should contact your doctor
- weakness and slowed breathing—this may be a sign of a more serious side effect such as respiratory depression which requires medical attention. Contact your doctor immediately.

## **If you're having trouble stopping opioids**

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you're having trouble stopping opioids. They can give you alternatives to manage the pain and provide advice on gradually lowering your dose.

You may experience withdrawal effects, such as agitation, anxiety and insomnia, but your doctor and pharmacist can help you manage these.

## **How about leftover opioids?**

After you have finished using opioids, take any leftovers to your local pharmacy to dispose of them safely, free of charge.

Do not share opioids with others and keep them away from others in the

house who do not need them, as opioids can cause unintended harm if not used under the supervision of a medical professional. This could include accidental ingestion by children.

For more information, speak to your pharmacist or doctor. Choosing Wisely Australia also has [free online information](#) about managing pain and opioid medicines.

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