

# Safer Use of Opioid Pain Medication

Prescription opioid pain medications—like oxycodone (OxyContin®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), morphine, and codeine—can help relieve pain after surgery or a serious injury. When you're prescribed opioids for pain, you can work with your doctor to make sure you're getting the safest pain management plan. This will help you prevent serious health risks from opioid misuse, like dependence, overdose, and death.

Medicare has programs that help you use prescription opioid pain medications safely.

## Opioid pain medication safety checks at the pharmacy

Before the pharmacy fills any prescription, your drug plan and pharmacy do routine safety checks, like checking for incorrect dosages or interactions with other medications you take.

When you're prescribed opioids, your drug plan and pharmacist may do additional safety checks, like:

- Checking for possible unsafe amounts of opioid pain medications
- Limiting the day's supply of your first prescription for opioids
- Checking the use of opioids at the same time as benzodiazepines—like alprazolam (Xanax®), diazepam (Valium®), or clonazepam (Klonopin®)—which are commonly used for anxiety and sleep

These safety checks are important if you have more than one doctor who prescribes these medications or if you take certain other medications with opioids. In some cases, your plan or pharmacist may need to talk to your doctor first, before the pharmacy can fill your prescription.

If your pharmacy can't fill your prescription as written, the pharmacist will give you a notice that explains how you or your doctor can call or ask your plan for a coverage decision, like an exception. If your health requires it, you can ask the plan for a fast coverage decision. You can also ask your plan for a decision before you go to the pharmacy, so you'll know ahead of time if the plan will cover the prescription. To learn how to ask for a coverage decision, visit [Medicare.gov/providers-services/claims-appeals-complaints/appeals/drug-plans](https://www.medicare.gov/providers-services/claims-appeals-complaints/appeals/drug-plans).

## Drug management programs

Medicare drug plans and health plans with drug coverage have drug management programs in place to help you use prescription medications—like opioids and benzodiazepines—safely.

Opioid use could be unsafe if you're getting prescriptions from multiple doctors or pharmacies, or if you had a recent overdose from opioids. If your plan is concerned that your prescription opioid use might be unsafe, they'll contact your doctor(s) to make sure you need this prescription and are using it safely.

If your plan decides your use of prescription opioids or benzodiazepines may not be safe, the plan will send you a letter in advance. This letter will tell you if the plan may limit coverage of these drugs for you, or require you to get these prescriptions from one doctor or pharmacy. You'll be able to choose which doctor or pharmacy you prefer to use, and share any information you think is important for your plan to know.

After you've had the opportunity to respond, your plan will send you another letter letting you know if they decided to put you in their drug management program or not. You and your doctor have the right to file an appeal if you disagree with your plan's decision. The letter from your plan will also tell you how to contact them if you have questions or would like to file an appeal.

**Opioid safety checks at the pharmacy and drug management programs generally don't apply if** you have cancer or sickle cell disease, are getting palliative or end-of-life care, or are in hospice or live in a long-term care facility.

## Talk with your doctor

You and your doctor should make treatment decisions to start, stop, or reduce opioid medications. Talk with your doctor about all your pain treatment options, including:

- If there are other options that Medicare covers to relieve your pain, like non-opioid medications and devices, physical therapy, occupational therapy, acupuncture for lower back pain, and chronic pain management and treatment services
- Your dosage and the length of time you'll be taking opioids, and creating a plan if you continue to have pain
- Any other medications you're using
- If they can prescribe you naloxone—a drug that rapidly reverses the effects of an opioid overdose—to have at home

Anyone taking opioids is at risk for unintentional overdose or death, and can develop an Opioid Use Disorder (OUD). Medicare covers treatment for OUD for as long as it's reasonable and necessary. For more information about treatment services, visit [Medicare.gov/coverage/opioid-use-disorder-treatment-services](https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/opioid-use-disorder-treatment-services).

For more information about pain management services and drug coverage, visit [Medicare.gov/coverage/pain-management](https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/pain-management). You can also call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). TTY users can call 1-877-486-2048.





## Medicare

You have the right to get Medicare information in an accessible format, like large print, braille, or audio. You also have the right to file a complaint if you feel you've been discriminated against. Visit [Medicare.gov/about-us/accessibility-nondiscrimination-notice](https://www.medicare.gov/about-us/accessibility-nondiscrimination-notice), or call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) for more information. TTY users can call 1-877-486-2048.

This product was produced at U.S. taxpayer expense.