

How to avoid opioid addiction after surgery

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(HealthDay)—Following surgery, many patients head home with prescriptions for 30 or more opioid painkillers—enough to trigger addiction, warns a leading group of anesthesiologists.

The American Society of Anesthesiologists recommends using prescription painkillers sparingly, if at all, after surgery.

"Nobody needs a prescription for 30 or 50 opioids, and even those who are in major pain and may benefit should only take them for a day or two," said Dr. James Grant, society president.

"There are effective alternatives and many people don't need opioids at all or at least should drastically reduce the amount they take," Grant said in a society news release.

Opioid painkillers—such as OxyContin (oxycodone) and Vicodin (hydrocodone/acetaminophen)—are highly addictive. And addiction can develop after taking just a few of them, the society warned.

Grant said post-surgical prescription practices have played a role in the U.S. [opioid](#) epidemic.

Despite the risk of dependence, many surgery patients receive [prescriptions](#) for a month's supply or more of opioid pills. And about 6 percent are still using them three months or longer after their surgery, according to a study published last year in *JAMA Surgery*.

"The opioid crisis is huge and affects everyone, rich and poor, male and female, folks who live in urban areas as well as rural areas. It's got to stop, and reducing opioid use during recovery after surgery is a big part of the solution," Grant said.

More than 2 million Americans abuse opioids, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Since 2000, opioid overdose deaths in the United States have increased 200 percent.

To reduce reliance on painkillers, the anesthesiologists' group offers

advice for coping with discomfort as you recover from surgery:

- Only take opioids when in [extreme pain](#). Medications such as ibuprofen (Motrin), naproxen (Aleve) and acetaminophen (Tylenol) can manage pain and soreness. These medications are not addictive and are far less risky than opioids.
- Understand that soreness and discomfort after surgery are normal and will improve within a day or two. These sensations are different than pain, which is typically sharp or intense.
- While in recovery after surgery, try to be clear when asked if you are in pain. Specify if you are sore, uncomfortable or in serious pain.
- If you have significant pain, ask that an opioid prescription be limited to a small amount, such as five pills. If you do take opioids, take them only for a day or two after surgery, three days at most. Your pain will improve significantly within a few days whether or not you take opioids.

Limiting the number of opioid pills helps prevent unused painkillers from getting into the wrong hands, the anesthesiologists said.

"Those who are in continued severe pain after [surgery](#) should ask a physician anesthesiologist or other pain specialist about other strategies to manage [pain](#), including exercise, nerve blocks and non-opioid medications," Grant said.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [prescription opioids](#).

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