

# Safe prescribing of opioids for pain management in children and adolescents: Tips for healthcare providers

## Key considerations before prescribing opioids for pain management

- Consider nonopioid options for pain.
- Ensure family members have the necessary information on safe and responsible prescription opioid use.
- Educate families about the dangers of opioid misuse.
- Share a pain management plan
- Provide contact information to ensure easy access for any questions or concerns.

## Why Opioids Should be Prescribed with Caution to Children and Adolescents

Legitimate use of opioids among adolescents is correlated with a 33% increase in the risk of future non-medical opioid use when reaching young adulthood.

As of 2015, past year and lifetime rates of opioid misuse among adolescents were 3.9% and 7.8%, respectively. This rate was much higher (20.1%) in young adults 18 to 29 years of age.

Past month misuse of opioids was reported in 276,000 adolescents, and past year misuse was reported by 17.2% of adolescents who use prescription drugs medically or non-medically in the previous year.

Non-medical use of opioids is strongly associated with heroin initiation.

Deaths involving heroin among adolescents aged 15 to 19 years increased during the 1999–2015 period and was 3 times higher in 2015 (1.0 per 100,000) than in 1999 (0.3 per 100,000).

Medication strategies in clinical practice and in the home are essential to curb these trends.



## Considering Non-Opioid Options

- Are opioids appropriate and necessary for pain management in this instance?
- Can nonopioid medications be used with the same effectiveness?
- Are other pain treatment options that don't include opioids (physical, occupational, behavioral therapies) possible or recommended?
- If opioids are indicated, what is the least amount of opioids needed for acute pain?

## Teach Safe Opioid Pain Management

The following points should be covered with caregiver/child to ensure safe opioid use:

- Opioids should only be given to the person they were prescribed for.
- Give the child opioids only for the reason they were ordered.
- Do not give the child any more opioids than indicated. Less can always be given if other ways of relieving pain work (like Tylenol or ibuprofen).
- Keep a medicine log. Tell you how the child is doing with their pain and how the medicines are helping.
- Store opioids in a locked cabinet away from children, relatives, and visitors.
- Keep track of how much medicine is in the container. This way, caregiver(s) know if someone else is taking the medicine.
- Safely get rid of any leftover opioids as soon as the child no longer needs them.

## Cover Risks of Opioid Misuse

Review common side effects that are not usually dangerous when directions for taking opioids are followed.

If the child has to be on opioids for a longer than several days or so, discuss other risks, including:

- Tolerance (needing more opioid for the same pain relief)
- Physical dependence (having flu-like symptoms when the child stops taking the opioid)
- Addiction (when someone craves the medicine so much that they keep taking it even when it hurts their health, relationships, or money). A child or adult addicted to opioids may:
  - Want to get more when the prescription runs out (they may even lie to a doctor to get more)
  - Do inappropriate or risky things they would not normally do (such as buy and use street drugs)
  - Try to get opioids from a friend or family member
  - Steal opioids



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## Provide a Pain Management Plan

- ❑ **Indicate timing** and **dosage** of pain medications as well as estimated **duration** of need
- ❑ **Encourage tracking** when and how much opioid medication is given
- ❑ Suggest when and what types of **nonopioid options** can be used instead
- ❑ Highlight any **potential interactions with** the child's **other current medication** to watch for
- ❑ Reinforce with parents never to give their child any more opioids than prescribed and how to use nonopioid medicines to help with pain.
- ❑ Encourage caregivers to inform you of their child's status and how the medicines are helping.
- ❑ Instruct caregivers **to call 911** when they observe the following signs that could mean a child is having a serious allergic reaction or an overdose:
  - Starts wheezing
  - Has trouble breathing
  - Has difficulty swallowing
  - Cannot be woken up after taking medicine
- ❑ Ensure family members have your number to call if a side effect is causing the child problems.
- ❑ Provide the website to locate the nearest local drug take-back site for unused medication  
<https://www.artakeback.org>.

## Healthcare Provider Resources

American Academy of Family Physicians Pain Management Toolkit. Accessed 9/12/19 at <https://www.aafp.org/patient-care/public-health/pain-opioids/cpm-toolkit.html>

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons Pain Relief Toolkit. Accessed 9/12/19 at <https://aaos.org/PainReliefToolkit/?ssopc=1>

Hauer J, Jones BL. (2019) Evaluation and management of pain in children. Up to Date, accessed 9/12/19 at <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/evaluation-and-management-of-pain-in-children>

Pain Management Best Practices Inter-Agency Task Force. (2019) Draft Report on Pain Management Best Practices: Updates, Gaps, Inconsistencies, and Recommendations. Accessed 9/12/19 at <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/advisory-committees/pain/reports/2018-12-draft-report-on-updates-gaps-inconsistencies-recommendations/index.html#top>

Pediatric Pain Management Toolkit. Accessed 9/12/19 at <https://emscimprovement.center/education-and-resources/toolkits/pediatric-pain-management-toolkit/>

Policy on Acute Pediatric Dental Pain Management. Accessed 9/12/19 at [https://www.aapd.org/globalassets/media/policies\\_guidelines/p\\_acutepainmgmt.pdf](https://www.aapd.org/globalassets/media/policies_guidelines/p_acutepainmgmt.pdf)

## Caregiver Resources

Be MedWise Program at NeedyMeds. Use Pain Meds Safely. <https://bemedwise.org/medication-safety/pain-management-medications>

National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2019) Prescription Opioids. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/prescription-opioids>

Rutledge, L. (2019) Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Programs. <https://arkansasag.gov/programs/prescription-abuse/>



## References

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Johnston LD, O'Malley PM, Miech RA Monitoring the Future National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975-2016: Overview, Key Findings on Adolescent Drug Use. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan; 2017. [Google Scholar]

Miech R, Johnston L, O'Malley PM, et al. Prescription opioids in adolescence and future opioid misuse. Pediatrics. 2015;136(5):e1169-e1177. [PMC free article] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

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Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Talking to your kids about prescription drug abuse. <http://www.bemedwise.org/docs/samhsatalkingtoyourkids.pdf> Accessed January 19, 2019.

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