

Prescription Opioid Pain Medication Tapering Fact Sheet for Injured Workers

What is tapering?

- Tapering is the process of slowly reducing your opioid pain medication dose over time to find the right dose for you. The right dose will be based on balancing benefits versus the risks of opioids.
- With your doctor and other health care professionals, you will develop a safer plan for managing your pain. This plan could include other medications, movement programs, pain management training, alternative and complementary medicine, and emotional support.
- The goal of tapering is to increase your ability to do the activities that you want to do and to decrease the amount of pain you experience while doing them.

Why should I consider tapering?

- Over time, opioid doses tend to increase for many patients due to a side effect known as “tolerance.” Tolerance means that the same dose doesn’t seem to work as well as it used to. After taking opioids for a few weeks, patients may feel that they need more medicine to get pain relief.
- Higher doses of opioids may be increasing your sensitivity to pain without providing better pain relief. At times, your pain may worsen as your opioid dose increases (opioid hyperalgesia). This is a result of how opioids interact with your brain chemistry.
- Opioids can also cause pain to spread from the site of the injury to your whole body. You may have started with a back injury, but over time you may feel pain all over your body. This is known as chronic pain syndrome.
- Long-term, high opioid doses increase your risk for breathing (respiratory) and stomach (gastrointestinal) problems, sleep issues, and overdose. These risks are more likely if you have certain medical conditions, especially those affecting your lungs, heart, liver, or kidneys, or if you use other medications such as anxiety medications (especially benzodiazepines) or sleeping pills.
- Tapering to a lower dose can improve your quality of life and function while reducing your dependence on a medication with serious side effects.

How can I get help with tapering?

- If you have a settled Workers’ Compensation claim, and you continue to use opioid medications to treat injury-related pain, **Opioid Alternative Treatment Pathway (OATP)** process within the Department of Industrial Accidents can help you.
 - You, your lawyer, and your employer’s insurer’s lawyer will meet with a judge who has not previously ruled on your case. Together, you will develop your personal goals for the program. The insurance company will continue to pay for both opioid medications and alternatives while you are tapering and beyond. These goals and agreements will be written into a mediation agreement (Form 19-A). Your employer’s insurer will cover the cost of the program and your lawyer’s fee.
 - You will be assigned a care coordinator who will help you work towards your goals for improved function and decreased pain on a lower dose of opioids. Your care coordinator will help you choose alternative treatment methods that work for you and connect you with specialists.
 - To learn more, ask your attorney or Department of Industrial Accidents staff about the Opioid Alternative Treatment Pathway.
- If you do not have a settled claim, ask your healthcare providers about tapering. There are good and bad ways to taper opioids. For more information, check out the following: CDC’s Pocket Guide: [Tapering Opioids for Chronic Pain](https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/clinical_pocket_guide_tapering-a.pdf)
(https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/clinical_pocket_guide_tapering-a.pdf)

This infosheet was prepared by the MA Department of Industrial Accidents with input from the MA Department of Public Health.