

Treating Chronic Pain with Opioids: Comparing Effectiveness and Cost

What are opioids?

Opioids are very strong prescription pain medicines. They are stronger than aspirin, Tylenol, Advil, and other pain medicines. They block pain signals in the body, and can act as sedatives, making you drowsy.

Opioids are used to treat short-term acute pain, such as pain after surgery or pain caused by a wound, burn, bad sprain, or other injury.

Opioids are also used to treat some kinds of long-term, chronic pain. This includes back pain, nerve pain, and pain caused by other long-term illnesses or conditions.

What should I try before opioids?

If you have chronic pain, we recommend:

- Start with nondrug treatments, such as exercise, physical therapy, massage, and acupuncture.
- If those don't help, try acetaminophen (Tylenol).
- If you still have pain or you also have inflammation, try ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn).
- If these do not help, ask your doctor about opioids or other drugs.

What are some risks of opioids?

Opioids are generally better for treating short-term pain than long-term, chronic pain. They may reduce chronic pain but not make it go away entirely.

If you take opioids for a long period of time, you may need to take higher doses to get the same pain relief. This is called “building up a tolerance.” If you take a higher dose, you are more likely to have side effects.

Will I become addicted?

If you take opioids as directed, the chance of addiction is small. Your body becomes used to the drug. You may need more over time. When you stop, you may need to go off it slowly. But it is not the same as addiction. Addiction means that you can no longer control how much you take.

Common Side Effects of Opioids

- Anxiety/nervousness
- Breathing problems
- Constipation
- Difficulty having an orgasm
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Itching
- Less desire for sex
- Memory problems
- Nausea/vomiting
- Weakening of the immune system

What are the side effects of opioids?

Opioids are powerful drugs. About half the people who take an opioid have one or more side effects. You and your doctor will have to look at the possible benefits and side effects, and decide if opioids are right for you.

Choosing an opioid

Few studies have compared opioids for treating chronic pain. But these studies strongly suggest that all opioids give the same pain relief at similar doses. And generic opioids relieve pain just as well as brand-name opioids. The only major difference between opioids is the price.

Our advice:

 If you have chronic pain and other treatments don't help, talk to your doctor about using opioids. We compared the effectiveness, safety, and cost of different opioids. We chose these as *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*:

- **Generic morphine extended-release pills**

The chart on the next page can help you compare costs.

Opioid Prices

Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs are in blue. We recommend these drugs because they are as effective and safe as the other drugs, and they cost less. Our analysis is based on a scientific review by the Oregon Health and Science University-based Drug Effectiveness Review Project. This is a summary of a longer, more detailed report you can find at www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org.

Generic Name & Strength (Note that other strengths may be available)	Brand Name	Average Cost For One Month
Hydromorphone pills		
Hydromorphone sustained-release 8 mg/once a day	Exalgo	\$349
Hydromorphone sustained-release 12 mg/once a day	Exalgo	\$520
Morphine pills		
 Morphine extended-release 15 mg/two times a day	Generic	\$48
Morphine extended-release 30 mg/once a day	Avinza	\$177
Morphine extended-release 30 mg/once a day	Kadian	\$247
Morphine extended-release 30 mg/two times a day	MS-Contin	\$270
 Morphine extended-release 30 mg/two times a day	Generic	\$72
Morphine extended-release 60 mg/once a day	Avinza	\$313
Morphine extended-release 60 mg/once a day	Kadian	\$433
 Morphine extended-release 60 mg/two times a day	Generic	\$101
Morphine extended-release 90 mg/once a day	Avinza	\$456
Morphine extended-release 100 mg/once a day	Kadian	\$692
Oxymorphone pills		
Oxymorphone sustained-release 10 mg/two times a day	Opana ER	\$290
Oxymorphone sustained-release 15 mg/two times day	Opana ER	\$343
Oxymorphone sustained-release 15 mg/two times a day	Generic	\$319
Oxymorphone sustained-release 20 mg/two times a day	Opana ER	\$509
Oxycodone pills		
Oxycodone sustained-release 10 mg/two times a day	Oxycontin	\$164
Oxycodone sustained-release 20 mg/two times a day	Oxycontin	\$306
Oxycodone sustained-release 40 mg/two times a day	Oxycontin	\$529
Oxycodone sustained-release 10 mg/two times a day	Generic	\$107
Oxycodone sustained-release 20 mg/two times a day	Generic	\$192
Oxycodone sustained-release 40 mg/two times a day	Generic	\$363
Oxycodone sustained-release 80 mg/two times a day	Generic	\$662

Prices are based on nationwide retail average prices for July 2012. *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs* obtained prices from data provided by Source Healthcare Analytics, Inc., which is not involved in our analysis or recommendations.

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