Safe Use of Opioid Pain Relievers

Opioids (narcotics) are powerful pain relievers that can cause harm if not taken as prescribed. Opioids are not meant to make you pain free but will help decrease pain to a level that allows you to function and recover after surgery.

- Every surgery is different in the length of time an opioid is needed. Many patients decrease the number of pills they take or increase the time between doses within a few days after surgery.
- The longer you take opioids, the less effective they become and the more difficult it is to stop.
- Your surgeon will work with you to keep you as comfortable as possible and help you decrease the use of opioids as you heal.
- Do not take opioids in greater amounts or more often than prescribed. When you take your medication as prescribed, you decrease the risk of dangerous side effects.
- For your safety, opioids should only be prescribed by one provider. If you receive a prescription for opioids from another provider, you must notify your surgeon.
- Lost or stolen prescriptions for opioids will not be replaced.

Pain Control Options After Surgery

- Over-the-counter medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Advil®), naproxen (Aleve®), and Celebrex®. Your surgeon will review with you what is safe to take after your surgery.
- Ice packs and heating pads - You can use one or the other or they can be alternated every 20 minutes as needed.
- Aromatherapy
- Walking and exercise; pace your activity with periods of rest - Your surgeon will tell you if you have any activity restrictions.
- Other treatments may be recommended by your surgeon specific to your surgery.

Possible Side Effects of Opioids

- Nausea, vomiting, constipation (hard stool)
- Itching, sweating
- Feeling sleepy or dizzy
- Feeling confused or forgetful
- Decrease in energy or strength, trouble sleeping
- Depression, anxiety
- Opioid overdose is marked by slowed breathing and can cause coma and sudden death.

Possible Issues with Ongoing Opioid Use

- Physical dependence – Withdrawal symptoms if opioids are stopped suddenly.
- Tolerance – Needing more opioids for the same pain relief.
- Addiction – Looking for and using opioids even though it may result in legal, social, physical, or mental health problems.
- Diversion - Giving away or selling opioids to anyone else. This is against the law

How to Safely Store Opioids

- It is recommended that opioids be stored in a safe or locked box/drawer.
- NOT in your bathroom medication cabinet
- NOT above your stove
- NOT in a hot car
- Away from heat, light, and moisture
- Away from children, family, friends, visitors, and pets

How to Safely Dispose of Unused Opioids

- Always get rid of unused medication as soon as possible
- Talk to your pharmacist or call the local police department about how to dispose of extra medication
- Look for drug collection sites or national drug take-back days in your area

For questions regarding pain management and opioid use, contact your surgeon’s office.