

Compass Opioid Stewardship in Practice

Microlearning Series



Sustainable Healthcare Transformation

Module 13: Optimizing Safety Through Opioid Dose Reduction

Welcome to Compass Opioid Stewardship in Practice. Each week, our Compass coaches will explore a real-world case, define a clinical goal, and walk through practical strategies to improve care. Whether you're tuning in via video, audio, or reading the summary, this session is built for busy clinicians like you.

This week's session is brought to you by Dr. Christine Blake Smith, DO; Clinical Coach in the Compass Opioid Stewardship Program.

Case Presentation

This week's case explores a 64 year old male with bilateral above-knee amputations and chronic pain transitioned to this practice in 2018 while on a high-dose regimen exceeding 400 MME. His treatment included OxyContin, oxycodone IR, and alprazolam.

Goal

Our clinical goal is to decrease opioid dosing to improve patient safety and reduce both patient and provider risk, including long-term medical complications and liability.

Achieving our Goal

Identify willingness for initial change.

- If the patient is not ready to reduce opioids, assess willingness to taper other higher-risk combinations, such as benzodiazepines.

Provide education on combination risks.

- Educate about the safety risks of opioid and benzodiazepine co-prescribing, particularly with aging.

Support gradual benzodiazepine tapering.

- Continue follow-up and support until the benzodiazepine is successfully discontinued, monitoring for anxiety or other symptoms.

Maintain regular follow-up visits.

- Schedule visits every one to three months for long-term medication management.

Offer ongoing, digestible education.

- At each visit, share brief educational points about long-term opioid risks, including hormonal suppression, opioid-induced hyperalgesia, sleep apnea, cognitive effects, and respiratory depression.

Reinforce tapering recommendations over time.

- Gently reiterate recommendations for opioid tapering while allowing the patient to choose timing.

Begin with small, patient-selected reductions.

- When readiness develops, start with very small dose reductions using a patient-preferred strategy, such as spacing out doses.

Monitor response to early successes.

- Continue follow-up after initial reductions, noting withdrawal symptoms, pain control, and functional changes.

Use early success to guide further tapering.

- After successful discontinuation of long-acting opioids, begin gradual tapering of remaining opioids (e.g., reducing by half a tablet every few months).

Track functional and safety improvements.

- Monitor pain control, alertness, memory, bowel function, and overall safety as tapering progresses.

Clinical Pearls

The clinical pearls we want you to remember are:

- **Tapering is a marathon, not a sprint. Not all patients can taper completely off, but any reduction improves safety and reduces provider risks.**
- **Consistent, brief education at each visit plants seeds that often lead to eventual readiness.**
- **If you offer a taper at every visit, even if it's tiny, removing a quarter or half a tablet or spacing doses further apart, patients are often surprised that they don't miss it.**
- **Avoid opioid and benzodiazepine co-prescribing whenever possible. Concurrent use of these two medications significantly increases overdose risk, especially in older adults.**
- **Long-term use alone is not justification for continued prescribing. Re-evaluation over time is essential.**
- **Rapport and persistence really matter.**
- **Real-world success stories are really powerful motivators, so feel free to use them even if they're not your own.**

The COMPASS program provides opioid and benzodiazepine tapering resources. For complex cases, we encourage you to reach out to your clinical coach for individualized assistance.

Thank You

This education has been brought to you through the generous support of the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services. Thanks for reading this week's Compass Opioid Stewardship in Practice Microlearning Series. Thank you for being part of the Compass Opioid Stewardship Program. And thank you for all you do caring for your patients.

Resources

- [Opioid and Benzodiazepine Tapering: How -To Guide](#)