



Managing Pain After Surgery with Opioids

You may be prescribed opioids after surgery as part of a comprehensive pain management program to help keep you comfortable while you heal and return to your normal activities. These may include oxycodone (OxyContin®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®, Norco®), hydromorphone (Dilaudid®), codeine, fentanyl, tramadol, or morphine.

Our goal is simple: to control your pain while protecting you from the risks of these potent medications.

A Modern, Research-Based Approach

In the past, providers often gave patients a large supply of opioids after surgery. We have learned a lot since then. Research shows that most people need far fewer opioid pills than they used to get.

By studying what thousands of patients *actually used* for their pain, experts can now match the number of pills you get to the type of surgery you are having. This new approach helps prevent leftover opioids from sitting in medicine cabinets, where they could accidentally harm a child or fall into the wrong hands.

What to Expect for Your Pain Relief

You and your doctor are a team. Here is the pain relief plan we will likely use to keep you comfortable:

1. **The Main Pain Relievers:** The first and most important part of your pain plan will often be over-the-counter medicines like acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®). Taking these on a set schedule can be a very effective way to manage pain after surgery. Your doctor will give you exact instructions.
2. **Opioids for "Breakthrough" Pain:** You may also get a prescription for a small number of opioid pills. These are only for "breakthrough" pain—a level of pain that the other medicines can't control.



How Many Pills Will I Get?

The number of opioid pills you receive will be based on what the research shows is needed for your specific type of surgery.

Here are some examples:

Prescription Guidelines for Common Surgeries	
Surgery	Number of Opioid Pills Prescribed
Gallbladder Removal	0 - 10 pills
Hernia Repair	0 - 10 pills
Cesarean C-Section	0 - 20 pills
Appendix Removal	0 - 10 pills
Breast Cancer Surgery	0 - 30 pills
Hip Replacement	0 - 30 pills
Knee Replacement	0 - 40 pills

OPEN: Overdose Prevention Engagement Network (2025). OPEN Prescribing Recommendations - Adult. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.56137/OPEN.000054>

Remember, these are just guidelines. Your doctor will create a plan that is right for you based on your health and your specific surgery.

What Side Effects are Common with Opioids

Opioids can be very effective for pain relief, but they can also cause side effects. Common side effects include:

- **Nausea and vomiting** – Feeling sick to your stomach or throwing up.
- **Constipation** – Difficulty having a bowel movement. Drink plenty of fluids and eat fiber-rich foods to help prevent this. Your doctor may also recommend a stool softener.
- **Drowsiness/sedation** – Feeling sleepy or groggy. Avoid driving or using heavy machinery if you're experiencing this.
- **Dizziness** – Feeling lightheaded or unsteady.
- **Itching** – A feeling of discomfort on your skin.



- **Slow breathing** – In rare but severe cases, opioids can slow down your breathing.

If you experience any concerning side effects, please contact your doctor or nurse immediately.

Your role in a safe recovery

You're an essential member of your pain management team. Here's how you can help prevent accidental ingestion, overdose, or misuse:

- **Follow directions** – Take your medicine exactly as your doctor tells you. Taking more than the prescribed amount can lead to serious health risks.
- **Use only if needed** – Only take if you have severe pain that other medicines aren't helping, knowing that zero pain isn't always possible.
- **Ask about naloxone** – Naloxone is a medication that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. Talk with your healthcare team about whether to have naloxone at home. While available over the counter, obtaining a prescription from your provider and using your prescription insurance coverage may be a more cost-effective option. Your doctor may also have naloxone take-home kits available.
- **Store safely** – Keep opioids in a secure place where others can't get to them, ideally in a locked cabinet, out of sight, and out of reach of children, pets, and visitors.
- **Dispose safely** – Return any unused medication to a pharmacy drop box or a community Take Back Day. Don't flush them down the toilet or sink. If you must throw them away, follow the steps below:



Household Trash Disposal:

If a take-back program isn't available, you can dispose of most medications in your household trash:

1. Mix the pills (do not crush them) with an unappealing substance like dirt, cat litter, or used coffee grounds.
2. Place the mixture in a sealed plastic bag or other container
3. Dispose of it in your household trash
4. Remove all personal information from prescription labels and throw away the original containers

Contact your healthcare team if you have any questions or concerns. We look forward to working with you to make your recovery as safe and comfortable as possible.