

Safe Prescribing for Opioid Use Disorder

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) provides advice to Albertans to support improved patient care and safety. This advice does not define a standard of practice, nor should it be interpreted as legal advice.

Patient FAQs are dynamic and may be edited or updated for clarity at any time. Please refer back to these articles regularly to ensure you are aware of the most recent advice.

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WHAT IS AN OPIOID USE DISORDER (OUD)?

Opioids are very strong medications used to lessen pain—hydromorphone, oxycodone, fentanyl and morphine are examples of prescription opioids. Opioid use disorder (OUD) is a medical condition that can occur when a person takes these medications in a way that negatively impacts their life, health and relationships.

If you are taking a prescribed opioid, check out these safety fact sheets: [Opioid Safety for Patients with Acute Pain](#) and [Opioid Safety for Patients with Chronic Pain](#)

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HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE OUD?

You may have OUD if you:

- are taking more opioids than you've been prescribed;
- are unable to reduce the amount you're taking;
- experience strong cravings;
- spend a lot of time getting and using opioids;
- stop participating in important activities because of opioid use;
- keep taking opioids even when they're negatively affecting your health; or
- can't stop taking opioids without experiencing negative symptoms.

If you are concerned you've developed OUD, please reach out for help.

I'M AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP. WILL I BE JUDGED FOR HAVING OUD?

OUD can happen to anyone. Some may feel embarrassed about their condition and reluctant to seek treatment, but no one should suffer alone or feel ashamed about asking for help. There are resources and treatments available to help you get your health back.

CAN MY REGULAR DOCTOR HELP ME WITH MY OUD OR DO I NEED TO SEE A SPECIALIST?

Any doctor in Alberta can prescribe Suboxone® (buprenorphine/naloxone), a drug commonly used to treat OUD. For other treatments, a referral to another doctor or to an [Opioid Dependency Program \(ODP\) clinic](#) might be required. Start by talking to your family doctor about your options and what treatment might be best for you.

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IS THERE TREATMENT FOR OUD?

Treatment for OUD can include medication such as Suboxone® or methadone, to help with cravings, prevent relapses and ease withdrawal symptoms, counselling, and drug education.

Most people need medication for OUD for months or years.

You can find addiction services near you by contacting a [clinic on this list](#) or calling Alberta Health Services' [24-hour Help Line](#) at 1-866-332-2322 (toll-free within Alberta).

MY DOCTOR ASKED ME TO SIGN A TREATMENT AGREEMENT—WHAT IS THIS?

A treatment agreement is a checklist that a physician may ask their patient to review and sign before beginning treatment for OUD. The agreement clarifies what is expected of you as the patient, as well as what you can expect from your doctor throughout your recovery. To ensure your safety, it is important that both you and your doctor be on the same page and fully understand all aspects of your treatment plan. The treatment agreement may also include your pharmacy or a similar one may be set up with your pharmacist.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SUSPECT AN OVERDOSE?

If you suspect an opioid overdose, call 911 immediately. [Signs of an overdose](#) include being unable to wake someone, slow or no breathing, blue lips or fingernails, gurgling or snoring sounds, etc.

Naloxone is a medication often used to reverse the effects of opioids and can prevent an overdose. If you're concerned, ask your doctor or pharmacist about keeping a naloxone kit at home.

WHERE CAN I GET NALOXONE?

Kits including naloxone and the supplies to give it are available to anyone (no health card, identification or prescription required) at many Alberta pharmacies and walk-in clinics. Find an interactive map of naloxone kit providers near you [here](#) and more information on how to spot an overdose and use a naloxone kit [here](#).

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I TAKE OPIOIDS FOR CHRONIC PAIN BUT I DON'T WANT TO DEVELOP OUD. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

If you are taking a prescribed opioid, make sure you're doing so safely by reviewing these fact sheets: [Opioid Safety for Patients with Acute Pain](#) and [Opioid Safety for Patients with Chronic Pain](#).

If you are already taking a prescription opioid for chronic pain, you may wish to discuss your treatment with your doctor to make sure your medication and dose are still appropriate. Safely reducing opioid use requires a plan and medical expertise, and should never be done quickly or without a doctor's help.

CAN MY DOCTOR JUST STOP PRESCRIBING ME OPIOIDS IF HE THINKS I'M DEVELOPING OUD?

There is some public concern that physicians are abruptly cutting people off their medication. The College has been very clear physicians should not abruptly stop prescribing opioids and must not abandon their patients currently receiving opioids. Safely reducing opioid use requires a plan and medical expertise and should never be done quickly or without a doctor's help.

If this situation applies to you, first speak with your physician. If this does not resolve the situation, you may wish to [file a complaint](#) with the College.

For more information, read the CPSA's [message to Albertans](#) who live with chronic pain.

I HAVE MORE QUESTIONS. WHO CAN I TALK TO?

For more information, please contact our Physician Prescribing Practices department by calling 1-800-561-3899 ext. 4935, or by emailing cc.inquiries@cpsa.ab.ca.

*The **See Beyond** project aims to shed some light on the impact of stigma and ways to reduce harm. Learn more [here](#).*

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