



Opioid Addiction

A Look at How it Starts

Opioid-related overdoses have become an epidemic in the United States. Opioid addiction often begins with misuse of medications—usually intended for short-term use—prescribed to help control pain after surgery or physical injury. Commonly prescribed opioids include Hydrocodone, Oxycodone/OxyContin, Oxymorphone, Morphine, Codeine, Fentanyl and Percocet. Opioids are powerful pain medications that are known to trigger our bodies to produce endorphins which are our brain’s “feel-good” neurotransmitters. Endorphins muffle our perception of pain and create a temporary but powerful sense of well-being. When the medication wears off, a person may take additional doses to get those feelings back or to dull their aches and pains as their body adjusts its tolerance. It eventually takes more and more medication to get the initial effect. Withdrawal symptoms also play a role in increasing desire to continue long-term and increase use of medications. These are often the first signs of opioid addiction.

When people are no longer able to obtain medications through prescription, they sometimes seek opioids on the street. This road often leads to Heroin, an opioid drug that comes in many forms. All opioids whether prescribed or not carry the risk of addiction, overdose and possible death. However, obtaining drugs illegally, off the street runs the additional risk of potentially deadly fillers being added. Fentanyl is often used to cut street drugs and due to its extremely high potency, is often the cause of overdose death.

Factors that increase the risk for opioid addiction:

- Living in stressful circumstances
- Having a personal or family history of substance use
- Struggling with severe depression
- Struggling with anxiety
- Engaging in risky or thrill-seeking behavior
- Chronic pain

Warning signs for opioid addiction:

- Taking more medication than prescribed
- Taking medication “just in case”
- Mood swings or changes in sleep patterns
- Borrowing medication from others
- Seeking prescriptions from multiple doctors
- Poor decision-making.

Opioid addiction can lead to serious issues at home and in the workplace. If you or someone you know is struggling with substance abuse—opioid or other—your EAP can help. We are here to support you as you navigate treatment resources. Reach out at 800-327-4968 (800-EAP-4YOU), TTY: 877-492-7341 or visit EAP4YOU.com for more info.