

Alternatives to Opioids: is there a Better Solution for Pain?

In the midst of an opioid addiction epidemic, most of us have heard that prescription pain medications have come under fire for their addictive properties. Drugs like Percocet and OxyContin (oxycodone) and Vicodin (hydrocodone) have been prescribed for pain and patients have become addicted. Another too-common scenario is one in which pills are diverted to people using them recreationally to get high, and those people become addicted. While actions such as prescription pill drop-offs and tighter regulation of prescription medications help to address these issues, people who suffer from mild to severe pain are left wondering if all pain medication is suspect, and if there are effective alternatives.

It helps to first understand what an opioid pain medication is, and how it differs from over-the-counter and prescription non-opioid medications. Opioid means “like opiate.” Opiates are drugs that come from the opium plant. Opioid drugs are synthetic (man-made) derivatives of opiates. They exert their action by attaching to special receptors called μ -opioid receptors. Essentially, these receptors send a signal that blocks pain signals. (They also suppress cough, though cough suppressants are not all opioids.) In stronger forms or higher doses, opioids can also cause a relaxed euphoria, which is the “high” recreational users seek. Heroin is an opioid.

Other types of pain medications work in very different ways. NSAIDs, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen (Advil) and naproxen sodium (Aleve), actually target the site of injury or pain by reducing the inflammation that is causing the pain. The advantages of these medications are clear: unlike opioid medications, they can actually assist in healing by reducing inflammation; they are non-habit forming as they cannot reach opioid receptors, and they do not cause drowsiness. They can also be very effective, especially in prescription doses. Furthermore, NSAIDs are uniquely effective at reducing fever.

In large doses and in people with health issues NSAIDs can have negative effects, but these should not be assumed; ask your doctor. Many people avoid these medications out of fear of becoming impaired or addicted, or overestimation of their risks, and suffer pain needlessly.

Tylenol (acetaminophen) is still a separate category of medication. Along with aspirin, it is an “analgesic” meaning it blocks pain signals, though not as completely as stronger opioid medications. It is preferable to aspirin in some patients (children and people for whom bleeding is an issue) but dangerous to the liver in high doses and/or combined with alcohol. Tylenol with codeine is available by prescription; codeine is an opiate.

Many people suffer from chronic pain of unknown origin, or fibromyalgia. This can often be treated effectively with SSRI anti-depressant medications.

While there has been much discussion of medication here, often medication is not the only option, or even the best one. Exercise, physical therapy, chiropractic therapy, and even acupuncture have all been shown to relieve pain very effectively in many patients, and new findings that offer non-medication alternatives emerge virtually every day. It is important to make educated decisions and ask your doctor, but suffering is often unnecessary.

While medical science is backing off the idea that pain is a vital sign, it is still important to consider ways to alleviate it. Long-term pain is linked with depression and clearly impedes quality of life. Pain is a symptom, and whenever there is a question about the source of pain or how it can be treated, those issues should be discussed with your doctor. If your doctor recommends something you disagree with, ask her to explain or suggest alternatives. Opioids are clearly fraught with issues, but that doesn't mean we have to live in pain.