



# Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula®

## ***HAZARDS OF OPIATES***

As a part of your evaluation and treatment at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula, you have been prescribed opiate pain medication.

Opiate pain medications such as hydrocodone (in Norco), or oxycodone (in Percocet and Oxycontin), are powerful pain relieving medications that can be valuable for patients suffering from an acute painful process like a broken bone or a kidney stone.

While these medications are important in the treatment of short-term pain, there are a number of important side effects that you need to know about.

- 1. They can be addictive.** Unfortunately, addiction to opiate pain medication is on the rise in the United States, and opiate pain medications are among the most abused substances in the nation. 1 in 7 Americans will misuse their prescription medications.
- 2. They can be dangerous.** Opiate pain medications can make you sleepy, and reduce your body's natural instinct to breathe. When taken in high doses, they can kill a person by making them so sleepy that they don't breathe at all. More people die in the United States (and specifically in Monterey County) every year from prescription drug overdose than from car accidents. This effect is more severe when opiate medications are combined with alcohol or sedative medications. Because of these effects, you should never drive while using any opiate pain medications.
- 3. Your body can become dependent on them.** Even if you don't become addicted to the pain medications, your body will adjust over time to the effects of the medication. As a result, if you take opiate pain medication for longer than a few weeks, stopping the medication will result in an unpleasant withdrawal syndrome. Symptoms usually include vomiting, diarrhea, and feeling like you have the flu.
- 4. They cause very severe constipation.** Opiate pain medications naturally cause constipation as a side effect. This can be so severe that people develop a blockage in their intestine that requires an uncomfortable procedure or even surgery to remove the significant backup of feces.
- 5. Over time, they change the way your body perceives pain.** Opiate pain medications alter your body's ability to feel pain if taken on a long-term basis. The opiate pain medications ultimately reduce your pain tolerance so that things that are normally not very painful, such as a minor scrape or bruise, are perceived by your body as extremely painful. When taken for a long time, they can also directly cause painful conditions such as Narcotic Bowel Syndrome, which can result in chronic pain and suffering.

Because of all of these side effects, it is important that you take opiate pain medications carefully, and only as prescribed by your doctor.

To try to avoid these side effects, take opiate pain medications only when your pain is so severe as to really need them. We are prescribing them to you as a short-term medication to help your pain until your pain is better and you no longer need such strong and potentially dangerous pain medication.