



October 2021

## Safer Use of Opioid Pain Medication

**P**rescription opioid pain medications—like oxycodone (OxyContin®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), morphine, and codeine—can help treat pain after surgery or an injury, but they carry serious risks, like addiction, overdose, and death. These risks increase as you take higher doses, or the longer you use these pain medications, even if you take them as prescribed. Your risks also increase if you take certain other drugs, like benzodiazepines (commonly used for anxiety and sleep), or get opioids from multiple doctors and pharmacies. Medicare is committed to helping you use prescription opioid pain medications safely.

### Safety reviews at the pharmacy

When you fill a prescription at the pharmacy, Medicare drug plans and pharmacists routinely check to make sure the prescription is correct, that there are no interactions with other medications you might be taking, and that the drug is appropriate for you. They also conduct safety reviews to monitor the safe use of opioids and other frequently-abused drugs. These reviews are especially important if you have more than one doctor who prescribes these drugs. In some cases, the Medicare drug plan or pharmacist may need to talk to your doctor first before the pharmacy can fill your prescription.

Your drug plan or pharmacist may do a safety review when you fill a prescription if you:

- Take potentially unsafe opioid amounts as determined by the drug plan or pharmacist.
- Take opioids along with benzodiazepines like alprazolam (Xanax®), diazepam (Valium®), or clonazepam (Klonopin®).
- Are newly using opioids—you may be limited to an initial 7-day supply or less. When you switch drug plans, your new plan may not know your current prescription information.

If your pharmacy can't fill your prescription as written, the pharmacist will give you a notice explaining how you or your doctor can call or write to your plan to ask for a coverage decision, including an exception to a plan coverage rule. If your health requires it, you can ask the plan for a fast coverage decision. You may also ask your plan for a decision before you go to the pharmacy, so you'll know ahead of time if your plan will cover the drug. Visit [Medicare.gov/medicare-prescription-drug-coverage-appeals](https://www.Medicare.gov/medicare-prescription-drug-coverage-appeals) to learn how to ask for a coverage decision.

## Drug management programs

Medicare drug plans have a drug management program to help patients who are at risk for prescription drug abuse. If you get opioids from multiple doctors or pharmacies, or if you have a history of opioid-related overdose, your plan may talk with your doctor(s) to make sure you need these drugs and that you're using them safely.

If your Medicare drug plan decides your use of prescription opioids and benzodiazepines may not be safe, the plan may limit your coverage of these drugs under its drug management program. Your plan may require you to get these drugs only from certain doctors or pharmacies to better coordinate your health care.

Your drug plan will send you a letter before it places you in its drug management program. You'll be able to tell the plan from which doctors or pharmacies you prefer to get your prescription opioids and benzodiazepines, and about any other information you think is important for the plan to know. After you've had the opportunity to respond, if your plan decides to limit your coverage for these drugs, it will send you another letter confirming its decision. You and your doctor can appeal if you disagree with your plan's decision or think the plan made a mistake.

**Note: The safety reviews and drug management programs generally won't apply to you if you have cancer or sickle cell disease, get hospice, palliative, or end-of-life care, or if you live in a long-term care facility.**

## Talk with your doctor

Talk with your doctor about all your pain treatment options, including if taking an opioid medication is right for you. You might be able to take other drugs or try other ways to help manage your pain with less risk. Your doctor may also prescribe naloxone, a drug that rapidly reverses the effects of an opioid overdose. What works best is different for each patient. Treatment decisions to start, stop, or reduce prescription opioids should be made by you and your doctor. For more information on safe and effective pain management, visit [HHS.gov/opioids](https://www.hhs.gov/opioids).

Visit [Medicare.gov/coverage/pain-management](https://www.Medicare.gov/coverage/pain-management) for more information about pain management services Medicare covers, and related issues, like drug coverage rules. You can also call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). TTY users can call 1-877-486-2048.

---

You have the right to get Medicare information in an accessible format, like large print, Braille, or audio. You also have the right to file a complaint if you feel you've been discriminated against. Visit [Medicare.gov/about-us/accessibility-nondiscrimination-notice](https://www.Medicare.gov/about-us/accessibility-nondiscrimination-notice), or call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) for more information. TTY users can call 1-877-486-2048.

This product was produced at U.S. taxpayer expense.

