

### **But I'm in pain! How can I wean off my pain pills?**

“Pain pills” or opioids used to treat pain are a double edged sword. On the one side they seem to be the only thing that helps, on the other they come along with a lot of problems. For one, the body develops tolerance to the pain-relieving effects of opioids, so that after a time they don’t work as well. People say they’ve become “immune” to them. As a result, pain over time may be harder to control with opioids.

#### **Opioids also have side effects that may interfere with healing and increase pain:**

- Constipation
- Immune system suppression
- Slowed breathing, which is particularly dangerous when opioids are combined with tranquilizers such as Xanax, Valium, Klonopin, Ativan
- Paralysis of the gut (ileus)
- Slowed gastric emptying and sometimes gastroparesis
- Disrupted sleep leading to more pain the following day
- Possible “opioid induced hyperalgesia” – a situation in which opioids actually make pain worse.

#### **What can I do instead?**

- Ask your doctor how you can wean off of some if not all of your opioids
- Ask your doctor to prescribe medications other than opioids that help with pain such as:
  - Gabapentin
  - Effexor, Cymbalta, or other drugs of that class
  - Low dose doxepin at bed time
  - Tylenol or NSAIDs (anti-inflammatory drugs such as Motrin or Aleve)
- Help that doesn’t come in pill form:
  - Relaxation training
  - Meditation
  - Guided imagery
  - Biofeedback
  - Distraction

#### **Self-help resources:**

American Chronic Pain Association <https://theacpa.org/>

The Pain toolkit <https://www.paintoolkit.org/>

Understanding Your Pain in 5 Minutes video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KrUL8tOaQs>