

# EFFECTS ON YOUR LUNGS

The most dangerous effect of opioids is respiratory depression.

Opioids slow breathing by acting on the brainstem. When breathing becomes too slow or stops completely, oxygen levels drop, leading to brain injury or death.

Warning signs of overdose include:

- Slow, irregular, or no breathing
- Blue or gray lips and fingernails
- Gurgling or choking sounds
- Inability to wake up

Illicit fentanyl significantly increases the risk of fatal respiratory depression because it is much stronger than morphine or heroin.

Naloxone is a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose if given quickly. It is safe, widely available in all U.S. states, and recommended for anyone at risk of opioid overdose.

# EFFECTS ON YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

Opioids slow movement in the digestive tract.

Common digestive effects include:

- Constipation (very common)
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain

Chronic opioid use can lead to opioid-induced constipation (OIC), bowel obstruction, or severe complications if untreated.

Some prescription opioids contain acetaminophen (such as hydrocodone/acetaminophen combinations). High doses of acetaminophen can cause serious liver damage, especially when combined with alcohol.

Injection drug use also increases the risk of Hepatitis C and HIV if needles are shared.



# TEST YOURSELF

How do opioids affect your body? Let's test your knowledge.

1. Which of the following is NOT a prescription opioid?  
a. Oxycodone      b. Hydrocodone  
c. Fentanyl      d. Ibuprofen
2. What is the most dangerous immediate effect of opioid overdose?  
a. Constipation      b. Respiratory depression  
c. Hyperalgesia      d. Insomnia
3. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl is a leading cause of opioid overdose deaths in the United States.  
a. True      b. False
4. Naloxone can:  
a. Prevent addiction      b. Reverse an opioid overdose  
c. Replace antibiotics      d. Cure opioid use disorder
5. Mixing opioids with alcohol increases the risk of overdose.  
a. True      b. False



ANSWERS: 1. d, 2. b, 3. a, 4. b, 5. a

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**CAUSE AND EFFECT**

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# OPIOIDS AND YOUR BODY



## WHAT ARE OPIOIDS?

Opioids are drugs used to relieve pain by attaching to opioid receptors in the brain and body. They include prescription medications (such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, codeine, and prescription fentanyl), synthetic opioids (including illicitly manufactured fentanyl), and illegal drugs like heroin. When taken exactly as prescribed for short periods, opioids can help manage pain. However, they carry serious risks, including tolerance, physical dependence, opioid use disorder (OUD), overdose, and death. Today, most overdose deaths in the United States involve illicitly manufactured fentanyl, a highly potent synthetic opioid often mixed into other drugs without a person's knowledge.

## EFFECTS ON YOUR BRAIN AND CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM

Opioids reduce pain by slowing activity in the central nervous system (CNS). This also slows other critical body functions.

Common effects:

- Pain relief
- Relaxation or euphoria
- Drowsiness
- Confusion
- Slowed breathing
- Nausea

High doses can cause extreme sedation, unconsciousness, and respiratory depression (dangerously slowed or stopped breathing).

Long-term use may lead to:

- Tolerance
- Physical dependence
- Opioid use disorder
- Increased pain sensitivity (hyperalgesia)
- Mood changes

If breathing slows too much, the brain may not receive enough oxygen (hypoxia), which can cause permanent brain damage or death.

## EFFECTS ON YOUR HEART AND CIRCULATORY SYSTEM

Opioids can slow heart rate and lower blood pressure. In an overdose, this may lead to cardiac arrest.

Injection drug use increases the risk of:

- Infective endocarditis (heart infection)
- Collapsed veins
- Bloodstream infections

Illicit fentanyl increases the risk of rapid respiratory failure, which can deprive the heart and brain of oxygen within minutes.

## EFFECTS ON YOUR DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

Opioids slow the digestive tract.

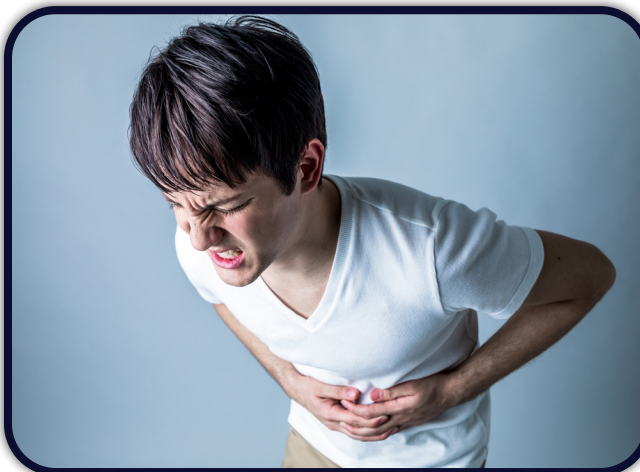
Common effects:

- Constipation
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain

Long-term use can lead to opioid-induced constipation or bowel complications.

Some opioids contain acetaminophen. Taking high amounts – especially with alcohol – can cause serious liver damage.

Sharing needles increases the risk of Hepatitis C and HIV.



## amanda's story

### Spinning Out of Control

After her car accident, Amanda was in constant, chronic pain. She tried going to physical therapists and chiropractors, but she just could not find relief. After months and months of trying to avoid the doctor, Amanda finally broke down. "I just can't take it anymore," she told him, "It's affecting everything. I had to cut back my hours just because my job was too physically demanding, and I ran out of short-term disability." The doctor wrote up a prescription for some Vicodin, and even though Amanda knew how addictive painkillers could be, she was desperate.

Before even pulling out of the pharmacy parking lot, Amanda took 2 pills, which was more than what her doctor prescribed, but the pain was so unbearable in her neck and back, she wasn't even sure she'd be able to make it home. Within minutes, she began to feel relief and even a little giddy and exhilarated. "Wow, these things are great," she thought to herself.

Within just a few months, Amanda's life skyrocketed out of control. Even though her body had healed, she was completely hooked to her Vicodin. Some days she felt like she couldn't even get out of bed unless it was to take her pills.

One morning, she woke up with a searing pain in her abdomen. After driving herself to the hospital, she walked in the front doors doubled over in pain. The doctors admitted her and had to do an emergency surgery. Not only had her bowel begun to perforate, she was developing an infection that could potentially kill her. When she woke up in her room after surgery, her doctor explained what happened. "Don't worry," he told her, "you're going to be fine as far as your bowel goes, and we'll get you some help to deal with your opioid dependence, too."