Sensitivity from Opioid Pain Medicines
Patient Education

What is sensitivity from opioid pain medicines?

Opioids are strong pain relief medications. When taken in low doses, they are safe and effective. Like any medicine, they have risks and side effects. Sensitivity from opioid pain medicines happens when taking opioids leads to worse pain rather than pain relief. Patients may have these symptoms:

- Pain from normally non-painful things such as stroking the skin with light pressure
- Pain that gets worse even if you take more opioids
- Pain that spreads out beyond the usual area

What are the causes?

A side effect of opioids causes the central nervous system to be extra sensitive. It may occur with any dose of opioid use, but most often with higher doses.

What are the symptoms?

Patients taking opioid pain medicines can become extra-sensitive to painful and non-painful sensations. Patients have more sensitivity to pain and a high risk of becoming dependent on opioids.

How is it diagnosed?

A doctor can make a diagnosis based on a patient’s medications, symptoms, and a physical exam.

How is it treated?

There are several ways to treat it:

- Reduce or stop opioid use
- Change to another opioid with less risk of side effects
- Start taking a non-opioid pain reliever

Only your doctor can change your treatment plan. Always take your medication exactly as prescribed.

Is sensitivity from opioid pain medicines different from tolerance?

Yes. Tolerance means pain is relieved by a higher dose, but only short term and to a point. Sensitivity from opioid pain medicines means pain gets worse even with a higher dose.

Only your doctor can change your dose. Never take more or less than your prescribed dose.

Supportive Oncology and Survivorship (SOS) Service

The SOS Service at Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI) provides support for cancer patients, including help with pain management and other symptoms or concerns.

Specialists from several HCI clinics and programs are part of the SOS Service:

- Supportive Oncology Clinic
- Linda B. and Robert B. Wiggins Wellness-Survivorship Center
- Patient and Family Support (social workers)
- Spiritual Care Services (chaplain)

Contact the SOS Service with questions or concerns by calling 801-213-4246, Monday - Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.