

# Prescription Medications



Prescription medications are given by doctors, pharmacists, nurse practitioners or dentists to people who need them for medical reasons. These medications are available at pharmacies with a prescription. They can be very effective when taken as prescribed, and can enhance a person's quality of life. For example, they can help prevent a heart attack or stroke, reduce pain, clear an infection, or help a person fall asleep. It is important to take your medication in the way that your prescriber has instructed.

## Proper Use

When prescribing medications, your health care provider takes into account many factors such as body weight, other medications you are taking, your age, and health conditions. If a drug is taken in a different way than it was prescribed (such as taking higher doses, sniffing rather than swallowing a tablet), the body could react differently. This could increase the risk of addiction and/or overdose. However, if taken as prescribed, prescription medications are safe and can help treat various physical and mental health related symptoms.

### **How does it work?**

Most prescription medications come in the form of a tablet or capsule. The drug enters the bloodstream and travels to different parts of the body. Some drugs exert their effect on the brain. This causes your brain to send out different messages. For example, Central Nervous System (CNS) depressants or sedatives send messages from the brain that slow down bodily functions and make you feel sleepy and relaxed.

## Medications and Misuse

Misuse of prescription medication can cause serious harm and in some cases can lead to addiction. When prescriptions are 'misused' they are used in a way that was not intended by a health care provider. This includes taking more than prescribed, mixing different medications (prescription and/or over-the-

counter), or consuming alcohol with medications. It is also considered 'misuse' when you use someone else's prescription.

The three types of drugs that are misused most often are: opioids, CNS depressants, and stimulants. Examples include:

- Opioids – hydromorphone, morphine, oxycodone, codeine, meperidine, fentanyl, methadone;
- CNS depressants (sedatives) – lorazepam, diazepam, alprazolam; and
- Stimulants – amphetamines, methylphenidate.

### **Opioids**

Opioids are mainly used to reduce pain related to surgery, disease or injury. Opioids such as methadone or buprenorphine are prescribed for people who have addictions to other opioids (such as oxycodone or heroin). Opioids, like many other prescription medications, have side effects associated with them. Your prescriber will give you the most appropriate dose of medication and can offer advice on proper management of your symptoms. If you are using this medication as prescribed, its benefits can outweigh the risks.

Misuse of opioids can sometimes cause you to feel 'high', an intense feeling of pleasure, which could lead to abuse of the drug. There are serious consequences associated with misuse of opioids, including some which are life-threatening.

## **CNS Depressants (Sedatives)**

Central nervous system (CNS) depressants slow down normal brain activity. CNS depressants may cause you to feel relaxed or sleepy, have slowed breathing, feel less tension, and cause you to have feelings of well-being. CNS depressants are commonly used to treat seizure disorders, panic attacks and sleep disorders.

Taking higher doses or mixing these drugs with other medications or substances without your prescriber's supervision can be harmful. Harms can include slowed breathing, reduced heart rate and sometimes even coma or death.

## **Stimulants**

Stimulants increase activities and processes in the body and are used to treat conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and narcolepsy (a sleep disorder). Stimulants make you feel more alert with more energy, and can increase your blood pressure and heart rate.

Misuse of stimulants can cause changes in behaviour and mood. Mixing stimulants or taking large amounts with other medications without the supervision of your prescriber can cause heart problems and seizures.

## **Prescription Medication and Dependency**

Misusing some prescription medications can change the way your body functions. These changes can lead to a tolerance to the drug, both physically (your *body* needs it) and psychologically (you *feel* you need it). When you abruptly stop using the drug, you may feel withdrawal symptoms. Even people who take medications as prescribed can feel withdrawal symptoms if they suddenly stop using them. The withdrawal symptoms depend on what the drug is and how long you have been taking it. Your doctor will know how to prevent these symptoms.

**NOTE:** This material is for information only and should not replace advice from an Addictions or Mental Health Counsellor, doctor or other health care provider.

## **Ensuring Patient Safety**

### **The Pharmaceutical Information Program (PIP)**

The PIP was introduced in Saskatchewan in 2005. It gives authorized health care providers (such as physicians and pharmacists) confidential access to patient medication records. This program was put in place to improve patient safety. Having access to a patient's drug history helps health care providers make safe decisions about avoiding prescription duplicates, or prescriptions that may cause harmful drug interactions. PIP also helps health care providers determine the most effective medication treatment when a person is taking several different types of medications. For more information about the PIP, see [health.gov.sk.ca/pip](http://health.gov.sk.ca/pip).

### **Did you know...**

- › Side effects of prescription medications can be made worse when the drugs are not taken as prescribed or are misused. Please talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about your medications.
- › Compared to other countries, Canada ranks second in terms of prescription opioid use, behind the United States.

## **Who can you contact if you need help regarding drug misuse?**

Contact your local Addictions/Mental Health Services office, doctor or other health care provider if you need more information. To locate Addictions/Mental Health Services near you here are some options:

- visit [healthysask.ca](http://healthysask.ca);
- check the green pages of your phone book for your local health region's services;
- visit HealthLine Online at [healthlineonline.ca](http://healthlineonline.ca); or
- contact HealthLine at 811 and ask to speak to an Addictions or Mental Health Counsellor.

