

Let's Talk: Opioid addiction

Presenter – Dr. Mary Anderson, Medical Director

Hi, I'm Dr. Mary Anderson. We're here today to talk about opioids. What are opioids? They are naturally-occurring and artificially-synthesized chemicals that reduce the intensity of pain signals to the brain. They are powerful and can be used in ways that are helpful or harmful.

Opioids act as a mask for pain

The use of opioids to relieve pain can be of great value. For example, after surgery or associated with terminal cancer. Opioids do not heal the cause of the pain. They change the perception of pain, both by blocking pain signals and by producing artificial endorphins, triggering the pleasure center in the brain. This is different from pain relievers such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs that work at the location of an injury.

Opioid addiction can be fatal

There was a time when instead of focusing on the quality of life and restoring function, the goal of treatment was to try and relieve almost all pain by taking medicine. That contributed to the overprescribing of opioids. However, the overuse or misuse of opioids can lead to serious problems, including dependence and death. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, since 1999 overdose deaths involving opioids have quadrupled. From 1999 to 2014, more than 165,000 people died from overdose related to prescription opioids.

The danger of leftover pills

Frequently, leftover pills were left in medicine cabinets and given to or taken by relatives or others. Sometimes they were misused for their euphoric effect. As the body develops a tolerance to the medication, users find they need more drugs to attain the same effect. Some try to intensify the euphoria by ingesting more pills or by snorting or injecting crushed pills. The body can stop producing its own endorphins, making the user feel depressed and sick when they're not using.

The pain of addiction

No matter the reason for the use, once a person has been taking opioids on a regular basis, the body becomes accustomed to them. So when one tries to stop taking them, the opposite effect

occurs. In opioid withdrawal, a person can have pain, including in their bones and joints, experience restlessness, elevated heart rate, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, sweating, and dysphoria with anxiety and irritability.

Prescription drug misuse can lead to illegal drug use

Increased regulations have been put into place to decrease the number of prescription opioids available. However, one unintended consequence of that has been an increase in the amount of heroin use. Once a person is dependent on opioids, they may feel as if every cell in their body is screaming in pain without the opioid, so they seek relief to not feel sick, like the worst flu imaginable.

Getting help to “kick the habit”

The term "kick the habit" was derived through the description of a person with violent leg jerks as they were going off opioids. So what is the solution? Well, it depends on the person's underlying difficulties. People are complex, as are pain disorders and substance use disorders. The whole person needs to be assessed and supported to get relief. Pain and addiction are physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. All of these dimensions can be addressed with thorough medical and psychological evaluations and treatment.

Assessment and treatment

The goals of treatment are improved functioning and quality of life. Assessment includes identification of medical problems. Identification of underlying psychological difficulties, including mood disorders, anxiety disorders, trauma-related disorders, and identification of substance use disorders. Treatment includes multiple modes of therapeutic interventions including, but not limited to, non-opioid medication treatment of underlying medical and psychological conditions, avoidance of opioids, but if needed, prescribing the lowest amount possible for the shortest period of time necessary.

Therapy and personal wellness can aid recovery

Other modalities, such as cognitive behavior therapy, in addition to physical therapy, occupational therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic treatment, and a focus on wellness, with nutritional counseling, exercise, yoga, and mindfulness meditation. When an opioid use disorder is present, using evidence-based treatment, including medication-assisted treatment combined with behavioral therapies and community support, such as through 12-step programs.

The path to recovery

Bottom line, no matter what the problem, if one will get help to define the problem and put a program in place, then getting starting working on that program every day with other helpful people, that change in course can get a person to a new, better place.

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Reference: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Drug overdose deaths in the United States continue to increase in 2015*. CDC.gov. Accessed December 2017.

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