

EFFECTS ON YOUR LUNGS

While most opioids are either swallowed or injected, they can also be crushed up and snorted, or they can be smoked. If you're taking your medication as they were prescribed, any sort of consequences to your lungs is unlikely. Abusing opioids, however, can have deadly consequences to your lungs like respiratory depression, septic pulmonary embolism, interstitial lung disease and tuberculosis. They're all scary lung conditions all cause damage in different ways, but the outcomes are all bleak.

EFFECTS ON YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

Just as opioids suppress your respiratory and central nervous systems, they also are known to suppress the immune system. Your immune system is what keeps you healthy as your body destroys any bacteria or viruses. When it's suppressed, your immune system can't do its job effectively, and something like a simple cold that would've made you slightly uncomfortable with a congested nose can suddenly be much more drastic. Long term opioid use eventually reduces or even destroys your immune system.



TEST YOURSELF

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

1. Which of the following is NOT a commonly known brand of opioid?
a. Demerol b. Taaka
c. Percocet d. Vicodin
2. Which of the following is a condition where the person experiences pain more intensely than normal, and is often an effect on the central nervous system?
a. Hypertension b. Hypoxia
c. Hyperalgesia d. Hepatitis
3. While the effects on the body are essentially the same for men and women, some studies show that women experience side effects more severely than men.
a. True b. False
4. What systems do opioids suppress?
a. Central b. Respiratory
c. Digestive d. All of the above
5. Tuberculosis is permanent brain damage due to your brain not getting enough oxygen..
a. True b. False

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



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CAUSE AND EFFECT

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OPIOIDS AND YOUR BODY



WHAT ARE OPIOIDS?

The term “opioids” covers a wide variety of drugs, all ranging from legal drugs like morphine to illegal drugs like heroin. The main function of opioids is to relieve pain by acting on the central nervous system. Legal opioids like oxycodone, codeine or morphine can be safe when prescribed by a doctor for a short time and in small doses. However, they’re very easily abused, which means when taken without a prescription, in larger quantities or in the incorrect way (like injecting, for example). The most commonly known opioid brands are: Demerol, Percocet, Vicodin, Fentanyl and OxyContin. Opioid use can help with pain relief, but they can also lead to feelings of euphoria, addiction, overdose or death. There are also some studies that show opioids affect males and females differently as far as severity of the effects, where women experience more drastic effects, but the following information is essentially the same for males and females.

EFFECTS ON YOUR BRAIN AND CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM

Let’s say you just had your wisdom teeth removed. The nerves in your mouth are sending electrical messages to your brain through your central nervous system to help you recognize you’re in pain. The purpose of an opioid is to suppress the central nervous system to relieve that pain while your body begins the healing process. Opioids don’t help you heal any faster, but they can help you manage your symptoms. There are, however, some side effects of opioids on your brain and central nervous system. As opioids suppress your central nervous system, you may have some difficulty walking or talking clearly, or you may be completely sedated. Some opioid users, particularly those who abuse heroin, experience sporadic moments of slipping in and out of consciousness. You’re also at risk for developing hyperalgesia, which means you experience pain more intensely than someone without it. This occurs more often in people who have used opioids for a long time, but it doesn’t mean their pain is any less real.

EFFECTS ON YOUR HEART AND CIRCULATORY SYSTEM

After your brain, your heart is one of the most important organs you have, and you put it at risk when you abuse opioids. When doctors prescribe opioids, they take into consideration your weight and other factors to give you an appropriate dosage, but it is still possible for you to feel a slowed heart rate as a side effect of opioid use. If you take more than what your doctor prescribes, your heart could slow down to the point of stopping completely. Even if first responders can get your heart to start beating again, you put yourself at risk for hypoxia, which is permanent brain damage due to your brain not getting enough oxygen.

When people ingest heroin or crushed pills, they also put their heart at risk of infection. Not only can your heart become affected by opioid use but your entire circulatory system can be compromised when you abuse harder drugs like heroin. Heroin abuse often causes collapsed veins, which may never recover.

EFFECTS ON YOUR DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

Just as opioids suppress your central nervous system, they also suppress the muscles in your digestive track to sloooww iitttt dddooooowwwwnnnnnnnn. Many people report constipation that’s anywhere from mildly uncomfortable to borderline painful. As the digestive tract practically stops, opioid abusers put themselves at risk for small bowel obstruction, a perforated bowel, or peritonitis—a serious bacterial infection in your abdomen. Nausea and vomiting are also common side effects of opioid use.

Your liver can also be negatively impacted by opioid use. Because acetaminophen is often combined with many types of painkillers, particularly Vicodin, acetaminophen toxicity can occur and cause liver damage. Drinking alcohol while taking painkillers can also put unnecessary strain on your liver, and it’s harder for your liver to break down both the drugs and the alcohol. Many opioids are abused by injecting them with needles, and if shared needles are used between multiple people, the risk for Hepatitis C is increased.



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.”