

# What Older Adults Need to Know About Opioid Pain Medications, Confusion/Delirium



If you are **60 or older**, and take prescription opioid pain medications, you are at risk for having side effects. Some common side effects include sleepiness, constipation and nausea. More serious side effects are confusion, shallow breathing, slowed heart rate and loss of consciousness. Breathing can slow down to the point of coma and death. It is important to ask your doctor about these side effects if you are given a prescription for opioids. Let's talk a little more about opioids and how they can affect your mental status.

**Opioids are strong pain medications** that can help if you have severe, short-term pain such as after surgery or other serious injury. Even when taken as directed, these medications may cause confusion, sleepiness, and memory loss. Another word for confusion is delirium.

**Confusion/Delirium is a sudden change in your mental status.** Delirium usually develops rapidly over hours or days. Older persons with dementia can also become confused that can be part of worsening of dementia and can occur slowly over months or years. Delirium can result with any opioid pain medication such as Tramadol, codeine, or morphine. Unrelieved severe pain can also cause delirium. Delirium may have other common underlying reasons such as pneumonia, urinary tract infections, other infections, or an imbalance of sodium, water, and other substances in the blood. Delirium is potentially reversible, for example, by reducing the pain medication, treating the infection and treating the sodium or water imbalance.

The liver and kidneys are responsible for clearing medications from the body. The function of the liver and kidneys is reduced with age, so opioids may stay in the body longer causing greater side effects.

There are **other therapies and treatments** that may work better than opioids to manage your chronic pain. Over-the-counter medicines such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen

and naproxen, and non-drug therapies like physical therapy, exercise and mindfulness meditation may be equally effective in managing chronic pain. Ask your doctor about these.

All persons taking opioid prescriptions should have **Naloxone (Narcan)** available in case of accidental overdose. Narcan is a **rescue drug** that can reverse the effects of opioids until the 911 team arrives. Narcan is available without a prescription at your local pharmacy and the pharmacist will teach you how to use it. Most Medicare Part D plans cover Narcan. Please tell your family or a trusted friend who lives nearby that you are on opioid prescription medication and have Naloxone. They need to know it is available and how to give it to you in case of an accidental overdose.

If you have concerns about side effects of opioid pain medications, please talk to your doctor. For general education on understanding opioid pain medications and other therapies, visit the Reynolds Institute on Aging's website at [www.aging.uams.edu](http://www.aging.uams.edu).

You can download the "Narcansas" app on your cellphone, tablet or computer. **It is free.** This App provides for life saving information and resources on opioids. The NARCANSas app will provide you with resources, links, and tools that will help you administer the drug naloxone in the moment of an opioid overdose and provide steps on how to save a person's life in the event of an opioid overdose. The app also has information for treatment, prevention and recovery.

FOR ANDROID USERS: Google Play: <https://bit.ly/2VYcpq8>

FOR APPLE USERS: I-Tunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/narcansas/id1460163807?mt=8>

## References

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