



# Opioid Risks and Alternative Treatments

The misuse of prescription opioids is a significant public health issue in the United States. Approximately 8.9 million people aged 12 or older misused opioids in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Opioid abuse claims more lives than motor vehicle crashes annually. Opioids are not the first choice for chronic pain outside of active cancer treatment, palliative care and end-of-life care. Evidence suggests that nonopioid treatments, including nonopioid medications and nonpharmacological therapies can provide relief to those suffering from chronic pain, and are safer.<sup>2</sup> Patients with pain should receive treatment that provides the greatest benefit.

## RISKS

Prescription opioids can be used to treat moderate to severe pain and are often prescribed following surgery or injury, or for health conditions such as cancer. However, prescription opioids carry serious risks of addiction and overdose, especially with prolonged use. Additionally, prescription opioids have several side effects, even when taken as directed:<sup>3</sup>

- Tolerance—meaning you might need to take more of a medication for the same pain relief
- Physical dependence—meaning you have symptoms of withdrawal when a medication is stopped
- Increased sensitivity to pain
- Constipation
- Nausea, vomiting and dry mouth
- Sleepiness and dizziness
- Confusion
- Depression
- Low levels of testosterone that can result in lower sex drive, energy and strength
- Itching and sweating

## ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

There may be other ways to manage your pain. Your doctor may recommend treatment options covered by your BCBSNE Medicare Advantage plan. Depending on the type of pain you are experiencing, covered options include:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®)
- Cognitive behavioral therapy – a psychological, goal-directed approach in which patients learn how to modify physical, behavioral and emotional triggers of pain and stress
- Exercise therapy, including physical therapy
- Medications for depression or for seizures
- Interventional therapies (injections)
- Exercise and weight loss
- Other therapies such as acupuncture and massage

➔ **PLEASE TALK WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER ABOUT THE BEST PAIN MANAGEMENT TREATMENT FOR YOU.**

1 Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2022). 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): Methodological summary and definitions. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/>

2 <https://www.cdc.gov/overdose-prevention/hcp/clinical-care/nonopioid-therapies-for-pain-management.html>

3 Dowell D, Haegerich TM, Chou R. CDC Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain — United States, 2016. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/rr/rr6501e1.htm>