Checklist for prescribing opioids for chronic pain

For primary care providers treating adults (18+) with chronic pain ≥ 3 months, excluding cancer, palliative, and end-of-life care

CHECKLIST

When CONSIDERING long-term opioid therapy

☐ Set realistic goals for pain and function based on diagnosis (e.g., walk around the block).
☐ Check that non-opioid therapies tried and optimized.
☐ Discuss benefits and risks (e.g., addiction, overdose) with patient.
☐ Evaluate risk of harm or misuse:
  - Discuss risk factors with patient.
  - Check prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP) data.
  - Check urine drug screen.
☐ Set criteria for stopping or continuing opioids.
☐ Assess baseline pain and function (e.g., PEG scale).
☐ Schedule initial reassessment within 1–4 weeks.
☐ Prescribe short-acting opioids using lowest dosage on product labeling; match duration to scheduled reassessment.

If RENEWING without patient visit

☐ Check that return visit is scheduled ≤ 3 months from last visit.

When REASSESSING at return visit

Continue opioids only after confirming clinically meaningful improvements in pain and function without significant risks or harm.

☐ Assess pain and function (e.g., PEG); compare results to baseline.
☐ Evaluate risk of harm or misuse:
  - Observe patient for signs of over-sedation or overdose risk.
  - If yes: Taper dose.
  - Check PDMP.
  - Check for opioid use disorder if indicated (e.g., difficulty controlling use).
  - If yes: Refer for treatment.
☐ Check that non-opioid therapies optimized.
☐ Determine whether to continue, adjust, taper, or stop opioids.
☐ Calculate opioid dosage morphine milligram equivalent (MME):
  - If ≥ 50 MME/day total (≥ 50 mg hydrocodone; ≥ 33 mg oxycodone), increase frequency of follow-up; consider offering naloxone.
  - Avoid ≥ 90 MME/day total (≥ 90 mg hydrocodone; ≥ 60 mg oxycodone), or carefully justify; consider specialist referral.
☐ Schedule reassessment at regular intervals (≤ 3 months).

REFERENCE

EVIDENCE ABOUT OPIOID THERAPY

- Benefits of long-term opioid therapy for chronic pain not well supported by evidence.
- Short-term benefits small to moderate for pain; inconsistent for function.
- Insufficient evidence for long-term benefits in low back pain, headache, and fibromyalgia.

NON-OPIOID THERAPIES

Use alone or combined with opioids, as indicated:
- Non-opioid medications (e.g., NSAIDs, TCAs, SNRIs, anti-convulsants).
- Physical treatments (e.g., exercise therapy, weight loss).
- Behavioral treatment (e.g., CBT).
- Procedures (e.g., intra-articular corticosteroids).

EVALUATING RISK OF HARM OR MISUSE

Known risk factors include:
- Illegal drug use; prescription drug use for nonmedical reasons.
- History of substance use disorder or overdose.
- Mental health conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety).
- Sleep-disordered breathing.
- Concurrent benzodiazepine use.

Urine drug testing: Check to confirm presence of prescribed substances and for undisclosed prescription drug or illicit substance use.

Prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP): Check for opioids or benzodiazepines from other sources.

ASSESSING PAIN & FUNCTION USING PEG SCALE

PEG score = average of 3 individual question scores (30% improvement from baseline is clinically meaningful)

Q1: What number from 0–10 best describes your pain in the past week?
  0 = “no pain”, 10 = “worst you can imagine”

Q2: What number from 0–10 describes how, during the past week, pain has interfered with your enjoyment of life?
  0 = “not at all”, 10 = “complete interference”

Q3: What number from 0–10 describes how, during the past week, pain has interfered with your general activity?
  0 = “not at all”, 10 = “complete interference”

TO LEARN MORE

www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/prescribing/guideline.html

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