

# Opioid Tapering

## Talking With Patients About Treatment Changes



[Opioid tapering](#) is the gradual reduction of opioid use. It's crucial for health care professionals to work collaboratively with patients to determine whether the best approach for their pain care includes tapering. If it's appropriate, health care professionals can support patients and build trust with effective communication and empathy—helping lead to a successful transition to lower opioid dosages, nonopioid treatments, or a combination of these.



**The following tips can be helpful for engaging patients in conversations about opioid tapering.**

► **Create a supportive, non-judgmental environment where communication can flow both ways.**

For example:

- “It’s important for us to talk openly about your needs, concerns, and progress so we can make informed decisions about your treatment.”

► **Solicit questions, opinions, and other input from the patient to ensure a collaborative process.**

For example:

- “How is your current pain management plan working in your daily life?”
- “What are some long-term goals you have for improving your health and well-being?”
- “Some patients that go through the tapering process experience withdrawal symptoms. These could include trouble sleeping and feelings of anxiety and depression. Some people also feel like their pain levels are higher. But we’ll work together to figure out a manageable tapering rate to lower the likelihood that you’ll experience concerning withdrawal symptoms. Do you have any concerns or questions about this?”
- “I’ll work closely with you if we start the tapering process to make sure we do it as safely as possible. We don’t want to lower your dose too quickly because lowering your dose more slowly is likely to be more comfortable for you. Based on your chart, I think lowering your dose by x amount per month would be a reasonable approach. How does that sound?”

▶ **Be transparent about why you want to discuss tapering. Use the context of what the patient shared and your knowledge of their condition to bring up tapering.**

For example:

- “After reviewing and considering your progress, we haven’t seen clear evidence that your current dose is providing significant pain relief or improving your overall quality of life. We do know, however, that the risks of opioid therapy are serious.”
- “You mentioned that you’re not dealing with as much pain anymore, which suggests your condition is improving. That’s great news! If this is the case, your opioid medication may not be providing any additional benefit. But stopping opioids suddenly can cause serious problems. That’s why I want to talk to you about tapering, which means to slowly reduce your opioid therapy.”

▶ **Talk through and address their concerns and worries if they are reluctant about tapering.**

For example:

- “Can you share with me the pros and cons you see in continuing your current treatment versus exploring some other options? [Follow-up] Any other concerns?”
- “Some patients who have to travel a lot to our office find telehealth visits are easier. Is there anything that can make your appointments easier?”

▶ **Reassure patients that there are nonopioid treatment options to help manage their pain before, during, and after the tapering process. Have a list of community resources ready to hand out (contact your local health department for examples in your area).**

For example:

- “We can try some other pain management treatments, like acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or aspirin... Do you need help finding out what your insurance covers? Or options that don’t require insurance?”
- We can also see if using heat, ice, rest, exercise, or physical therapy can help. How does that sound? [Follow-up] Would you like a list of places in our area that provide these kinds of therapies?”



**Want to know more?**

- [cdc.gov/OpioidGuideline](https://www.cdc.gov/OpioidGuideline)
- [cdc.gov/OpioidTraining](https://www.cdc.gov/OpioidTraining)