Tips for Community Pharmacists

Supporting Patients who are Tapering

Opioid tapering is the gradual reduction of opioid use. Community pharmacists can support prescribing clinicians who are tapering their patients by being familiar with the opioid tapering process and counseling patients on what is involved and what they can expect. Pharmacists should be able to coordinate care with prescribers using collaborative practice agreements.

How patients may experience tapering

After slow, voluntary reduction of long-term opioid dosages, patients might experience improvements in:

- Functionality
- Quality of life
- Anxiety
- Mood without worsening pain or with decreased pain levels

Patients might also experience stress while tapering and might be at risk of worsening mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation) and opioid overdose. To reduce this risk, if patients share their concerns with you, you can acknowledge their fears and concerns and provide encouragement and support. You can talk to patients about potential pain or withdrawal symptoms they may experience, how to manage them and a timeline for expected resolution.

Ways to Alleviate Symptoms of Tapering

You can suggest talking with their prescribing clinicians about the following:

- Exercise, mind-body, or psychological therapies.
- Acupuncture or massage.
- Nonopioid medications (e.g., NSAIDs, selected antidepressants, or selected anticonvulsants)

If patients ask, you can share information about services in the patient's area, including free or low-cost options.

Withdrawal symptoms that may develop within hours of the taper but usually resolve over time:

- Anxiety
- Diarrhea
- Muscle aches
- Restlessness
- Sweating

Clinicians should advise patients of an increased risk for overdose on abrupt return to a previously prescribed higher dose of opioids because of loss of opioid tolerance. As care team members, pharmacists can support these messages, educate and offer naloxone. You can suggest that patients regularly communicate with their prescriber during the tapering process to adjust the tapering schedule or to manage withdrawal with other medications as needed.

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You Can Be Prepared if Patients Ask About Tapering

You can build trust with effective communication and empathy—helping lead to a successful transition to lower opioid dosages. The following tips can be helpful as conversation starters when talking with patients:

Show patients that you are available to support them through the tapering process.	"We'll work together with your doctor to continue lowering your dose at a pace that feels right for you. I'm here to help support you. How can I best help you?"
Create a supportive, non-judgmental environment where communication can flow both ways.	"It's important for us to talk openly about your needs, concerns, and progress so we can make informed decisions about your treatment. What are some concerns you might have about your tapering plan?"
Talk through and address their concerns and worries. *Patients may be struggling with their tapering process.*	"Some patients who go through the tapering process experience withdrawal symptoms. What did your doctor tell you about withdrawal symptoms?"
Acknowledge patient fears about tapering. *Many patients fear stigma, withdrawal symptoms, pain, and/or abandonment*	"I know you can do this." (If you expect to see the patient again:) "I'll stick by you through this." "While pain might get worse at first for some people, over time, many find that their pain is not worse than it was on opioids. Many patients say that their pain is less than it was on opioids and that their ability to function, quality of life, and mood improve after completing a taper."

Want to know more?

Check out the following links for more information on related topics.

- CDC's Clinical Practice Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Pain
- Tapering Mini Module
- Opioid Prescribing Resources

- Nonopioid Therapies for Pain Management
- Continuing Opioid Therapy
- Opioid Information for Patients