

Opioid Tapering

Talking With Patients About Treatment Changes



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

You can tailor pain management approaches that fit your patients' unique needs, preferences, and circumstances by incorporating your training in patient communication. Keep in mind the following best practices:

- Start conversations with open-ended questions to address patient concerns, expectations, and treatment support needs
- Engage patients in shared decision-making, open conversations, and collaborative discussions
- Approach conversations with empathy and compassion
- Use non-judgmental language



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.”

▶ **Talk through and address their concerns and worries. Patients might be hesitant or reluctant to taper.**

For example:

- “Can you share with me the pros and cons you see in continuing your current treatment versus exploring some other options?”
- “What other concerns do you have about the possibility of reducing or stopping opioid use?”

CONVERSATION STARTER

▶ **Solicit questions, opinions, and other input from the patient. Remember, this is 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 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 that can raise your risk of serious problems. 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 use with a lower dosage or to potentially stop taking them altogether.”

▶ **Reassure patients that there are non-opioid treatment options to help manage their pain before, during, and after the tapering process.**

For example, “We can try some other pain management treatments, like acetaminophen or a type of medicine called NSAIDs. Some examples of NSAIDs are ibuprofen and aspirin. We can also see if using heat, ice, rest, or exercise can help too. How does that sound?”

CONVERSATION STARTER



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](#)