



Understanding Opioid-Induced Constipation 156

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What is opioid-induced constipation (OIC)?

Opioid-induced constipation, or OIC, is a condition that affects how your digestive system works. Opioids are strong pain medicines that slow bowel movements, causing fewer or more difficulty having a bowel movement than normal. Hence the term “opioid-induced” constipation.

Your healthcare provider might prescribe opioids if you have a condition that causes moderate to severe pain. Healthcare providers may prescribe opioids for pain from a procedure, such as surgery or dental work; an injury or accident; a chronic, or long-lasting, condition that causes pain; cancer or illness at the end of life. While opioids can treat pain effectively, they have known side effects. Between 50 and 80 percent of people who take opioid medicines have constipation.

OIC is the most common side effect that opioids have on your digestive system. However, there are others. Opioid-induced bowel dysfunction, or OIBD, is the medical term for the effects on the digestive system caused by opioids. Besides constipation, other symptoms of OIBD include heartburn, nausea, vomiting, a bloated feeling, as well as chronic, or long-lasting, abdominal pain.

What are the symptoms of opioid-induced constipation (OIC)?

The main symptom of OIC is a change in your usual bowel habits after you start taking opioid medicines.

Changes may include:

- Less frequent bowel movements
- Difficulty having bowel movements
- Feeling like you cannot empty everything completely
- Very firm or hard bowel movements

Besides constipation, opioid medicines can cause other side effects. For example, you may have side effects related to your nervous system. These can include nausea and vomiting, slow breathing, feeling very sleepy, and feeling either “high” or depressed. You might also have worsening abdominal pain.

What causes opioid-induced constipation (OIC)?

Your body and essentially your muscles and nerves have areas called “receptors” in the digestive system. When you take opioid medicines, they activate these receptors and change the way your digestive system works. Opioid medicines slow down the normal movement of food and waste through your system. They also reduce the moisture that makes it easier to have bowel movements and tighten up the muscles that need to relax when you have a bowel movement.

OIC risk factors

Taking opioid medicines is the main risk factor for opioid-induced constipation. You can lower your risk of OIC, relieve symptoms, or both by talking with your healthcare provider and pharmacist before you start taking opioid medicines.

Alarm features of opioid-induced constipation (OIC)

If you have certain symptoms, your healthcare provider will check for other conditions besides OIC. These symptoms can include:

- Unexplained weight loss
- Frequent fevers
- Blood in your bowel movements
- A low red blood cell count, called anemia
- A history of colon cancer in your family

What are the consequences of opioid-induced constipation (OIC)?

Opioid-induced constipation can be so unpleasant that you stop taking the opioid medicines. But if they control your pain best, you might not get the pain relief that you need. In rare cases, OIC can cause serious health problems, including pain in the rectum, where bowel movements leave the body. It can also cause a blocked or torn bowel. This is serious and can be life-threatening. If constipation becomes severe, your healthcare provider may prescribe medications such as pills, enemas, or suppositories to relieve it.

Questions to ask your healthcare provider about opioid-induced constipation (OIC)

If your healthcare provider prescribes

A **suppository** is a way to deliver medication by insertion into a part of the body where it dissolves. There are three types of suppositories, each to insert into a different section of the body. In OIC treatments rectal suppositories would be used by inserting it into the rectum.

opioid medicines, ask how likely your specific medicine is to cause constipation. It is best to prevent OIC, if possible. Talking with your healthcare provider before you start taking opioids is the best way to do this.

About IFFGD

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