

Discussing chronic pain with your doctor

For many trades workers, complete relief from pain after an accident or illness may be impossible. Living with chronic pain (i.e., pain that lasts longer than three months) can become distracting, making it difficult to work safely.

How workers manage pain at work is a workplace safety issue. Pain should be treated by a qualified health care professional, not self-managed, especially if self-management involves using illicit drugs or opioids.

Explain dangers

If used under a physician's care, opioids can be an effective, short-term method of pain management for injured workers. However, long-term use of opioids to treat chronic pain significantly increases the risk of opioid-related harms, such as addiction.

There is a lack of scientific literature supporting the use of opioids for chronic pain. It is important to consult your health care provider to make sure you are using opioid medication safely.

Opioids should only be used to treat a worker's chronic pain if they improve function and help the worker achieve their goals, such as performing work-related tasks.

Identify controls

Doctors play a key role in the workplace accommodation process. They explain the functional impairments and restrictions a worker might experience due to their chronic pain.

If you are prescribed an opioid, Health Canada recommends that you ask your health care provider the following:

- Why am I being prescribed this medication?
- What are the benefits?
- When can I expect to feel better?
- How much pain relief should I expect?
- How long should I be taking this medication?
- Are there any non-opioid alternatives?

- What are the risks and potential side effects?
- How will this medication affect my ability to perform my work tasks safely, including high-risk activities?
- Is there a risk I will become addicted?
- What should I do if the medication doesn't work?

To advise you properly, your health care provider needs all of the facts. At a minimum, you should share any concerns about taking an opioid medication, as well as whether you smoke, take other medications, undergo other therapies to manage your pain, or have a history of problematic alcohol or drug use.

Demonstrate

Advocate for changes to accommodation plans and reduce systemic barriers faced by workers who experience chronic pain at your workplace.

Ensure your co-workers know where to find information on how to talk to their physician, such as Health Canada's "Talking to Your Health Care Provider About Opioids" web page (at Canada.ca) or IHSA's "Workplace Mental Health" topic page (at IHSA.ca).