

# “Will Post-Surgery Opioids Make Me Addicted?”

## SCOPE of Pain Colleague to Colleague Podcast #14

Welcome back to the *SCOPE of Pain* Podcast Series. This is Dr. Daniel Alford, Professor of Medicine and Course Director for the Boston University School of Medicine *SCOPE of Pain* program.

We will now discuss a patient who's afraid that taking opioid analgesics after surgery will cause opioid addiction. A patient with end-stage symptomatic osteoarthritis of the right knee, with significant impairment in her quality of life and function is scheduled for a total knee arthroplasty. She is afraid that receiving postoperative opioid analgesics will result in opioid addiction. She has no personal or family history of substance use disorders or mental illness.

How will you educate this patient about the risks and benefits of opioids for managing her postoperative pain? First, it will be important to educate her about the difference between acute pain, which should resolve as the acute injury heals versus chronic pain, which by definition persists past the time of normal healing and can be a lifelong problem.

Many of the concerns regarding prescription opioids and addiction risk are in patients suffering with chronic pain on long-term opioids, not the short-term use of opioids for postoperative pain. While opioids are not always necessary for the treatment of acute pain, in some cases they may be needed to diminish the pain, to allow the patient to participate in rehabilitative services.

National organizations, including the CDC, state that when opioids are indicated for acute pain, short-acting opioids should be used, and the duration of the opioid prescription should usually be no more than three days and rarely more than seven days. Many states have passed laws that limit the duration of opioids for acute pain to less than seven days.

In this case, the likelihood of developing an opioid addiction with a three- to seven-day opioid prescription for acute postoperative pain would be extremely low, as opposed to the risks associated with the use of opioids for chronic pain. We know from observational studies that the risk of opioid misuse goes up with longer duration of opioids, defined as over three months, higher doses, defined as greater than 100 morphine milligram equivalents, and the initiation and prolonged use of extended-release, long-acting opioids.

Reassuring this patient about the potential benefits, such as active participation in physical therapy and the lower risk of short-term postoperative opioids will be an important part of her preoperative care.

How to educate patients about the risks and benefits of opioids analgesics after surgery is addressed in the *SCOPE of Pain* program. You're not alone in facing these challenging issues.

Thanks for listening.

Be sure to check back often, as new Podcasts will be added throughout the year.

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