

# WHAT TO DO WHEN OPIOID USE BECOMES A PROBLEM

Although opioids are prescribed to help people cope with pain, they can lead to serious problems. Some people develop opioid use disorder (OUD): they experience cravings and withdrawal symptoms, and they have difficulty stopping their use even when they want to.

If any of these signs are familiar to you, you're not alone – lots of people struggle with opioid use. It can be very hard to accept that your opioid use is problematic, but help is available. Everyone deserves care, and there's no reason to feel ashamed.



## SIGNS OF OUD: THE 4 CS

- **CRAVING**
- **COMPULSION** to use
- Loss of **CONTROL** of amount or frequency of use
- Use despite **CONSEQUENCES**

## THE CYCLE OF OPIOID USE

If someone takes opioids every day, their brain gets used to their effects. If they suddenly stop using opioids, the brain has a reaction to the opioids not being there anymore. When this happens, people experience withdrawal, which can include severe muscle aches, nausea and vomiting, cramps, chills, sweating, anxiety, yawning, and goosebumps. The fear of withdrawal can make people keep using opioids even when they don't want to.

## MAKING A CHANGE

Not everyone wants to change their opioid use. Some people may be thinking about making changes but not be ready. It's normal for people's goals to change over time. If you're interested in changing or stopping your opioid use, you have many options! There's no one right way to make a change, and reaching out to someone who understands might help you decide what would be best for you.

## YOUR OPTIONS

**Harm reduction** is about finding ways to lower the risk of harm. For opioids, this might mean using less, getting your drugs tested, going to a safe consumption site, using the National Overdose Response Service (1-888-688-6677, [www.nors.ca](http://www.nors.ca)), using with others rather than alone, or taking opioids by mouth rather than injecting or smoking. CATIE (<https://tinyurl.com/5frj4hcn>) is one option for finding resources and advice about reducing your risk of harm.



[www.metaphi.ca/  
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raam-clinics](http://www.metaphi.ca/raam-clinics)

People who experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop using opioids may want to try **opioid agonist therapy**. Buprenorphine (Suboxone or Sublocade), methadone, and slow-release oral morphine (Kadian) are all long-lasting opioids that, in the right dose, prevent withdrawal and cravings without causing intoxication. You can discuss these different medications with your health care provider to decide which one would be best for you. There are **special clinics** for opioid agonist therapy that you can go to if you don't have access to a primary care provider.

**Mental health treatment** can be helpful for people who have depression, anxiety, trauma, or suicidal thoughts. It's common for people to use substances like alcohol or drugs when they're feeling sad or anxious, but this can make things worse in the long run. The Connex Ontario website (<https://www.connexontario.ca/en-ca>) will help you find mental health services near you.

**Peer support** is an important way to connect with people who understand what you're going through. Most cities and towns have local organizations offering online and in-person peer support options, both groups and one-on-one. You can try different options until you find something that feels right.

## DON'T GO COLD TURKEY!

If you have been taking a high dose of opioids every day for more than a few months, it can be dangerous to just stop taking them. When you stop taking opioids, your tolerance decreases very quickly (hours or days). **Symptoms of opioid withdrawal can last for weeks or longer (depending on how long and how much you've been using), and you are at very high risk of relapse or toxicity if you use opioids, especially street opioids, to relieve these symptoms.** It is much safer to either switch to OAT or taper your opioid slowly.



## BE KIND TO YOURSELF

No matter what you decide to do, it's important to try to take care of yourself. This isn't always easy, but small steps matter! Here are some ideas of ways to practice self-care:



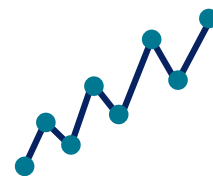
Check in with yourself. Are you **Hungry**, **Angry**, **Lonely**, or **Tired (HALT)**? Give your body what it needs, whether it's a snack, a glass of water, a nap, or some exercise or stretches.



Write down your thoughts and feelings. This helps get them out of your head and lets you track your goals and your progress.



Practice deep breathing and mindfulness (focus on *right now*, on purpose, without judgment).



Remember that progress isn't always a straight line. Be patient with yourself and try to accept where you are today.



Be kind to yourself. Tell yourself that you'll get through this.

## HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

If you have any questions about OUD treatment, you should speak to your health care provider. You can also find more information and resources on the META:PHI website.