

# Tolerance, Physical Dependence, and Addiction: *What's the difference?*

Developing a **tolerance** and **physical dependence** is a normal, expected result of taking opiates on a regular basis for a long period of time. Dependence on opiates can occur in as little as a few weeks. Physical dependence to your medications is not the same as addiction, although there is a risk of becoming addicted to prescription opiates, even if you take them as prescribed. The development of **addiction** to your prescriptions is well documented and a significant risk for long term opiate use.

**FACTS** | Tolerance, Dependence, and Addiction are **not** the same thing



For more information or to schedule an appointment with a physician, please call Plumas District Hospital at:

(530) 283-2121  
or  
(530) 283-0650  
or  
(530) 283-5640

**Opiates:**  
Therapeutic Use  
vs. Dependence

*Just because you are  
taking opiates does  
not mean you are  
addicted to them*

  
**Plumas**  
DISTRICT HOSPITAL

1065 Bucks Lake Road | Quincy, CA  
Phone: (530) 283-2121  
Fax: (530) 283-7953 | [www.pdh.org](http://www.pdh.org)

## Tolerance

Tolerance to medication means that you may require more medication over time to get the same amount of pain relief. However, increasing doses may not help and may cause additional side effects. If you develop a tolerance to your medication and the risks begin to outweigh the benefits of treatment, your Provider may decide to change your treatment. Tell your Provider if you are experiencing signs of tolerance to your medication so that you can discuss treatment options.

## Physical Dependence

Physical dependence to your medications is not the same as addiction. Physical dependence means that if you decrease your use of prescription medication too quickly or too much, or if it is stopped or reversed by medication, you may experience signs and symptoms of withdrawal. You may experience any of the following: Runny nose, yawning, large pupils, goose bumps, abdominal pain and cramping, diarrhea, irritability, general aches throughout your body, or flu-like feelings. While opioid withdrawal is uncomfortable, the risk of being life-threatening is very low. Talk to your Provider before you decrease your use or stop use of your medication. They can help you to taper off of the dosage safely and minimize your feelings of withdrawal.

## Addiction

The risk of becoming addicted is more common in people who have a personal and family history of addiction. It is imperative that you are honest with your Provider and notify them of any history of drug use and/or addiction. Addiction is a very dangerous condition that should not go untreated and can be fatal. Notify your Provider if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Strong urge or cravings to use opiates
- Use of opiates are causing problems in your personal, romantic and professional life including legally, financially or emotionally
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms when not taking medications, which can be relieved by taking more
- Decreased quality of life and/or function due to opiate use. This includes giving up important social, occupational or recreational activities
- Participating in risky behaviors in order to obtain opiates or while under the influence of opiates. Continuing to use even when it puts you in danger
- Allowing your primary focus to be on opiates, taking and obtaining them. Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from your use
- Continuing to use, even when you know you have a physical or psychological problem that could have been caused or made worse by opiates
- Continuing to use opiates even when it causes problems in relationships
- Taking opiates in larger amounts or for longer than you're meant to
- Needing more of the opiates to get the effect you want (tolerance)
- Wanting to cut down or stop using opiates but not managing to



## Asking for help

Your Provider can assist you in finding resources to get help with your addiction. They can help you find other pain management options and treatment modalities as well as assist you in tapering off of your prescription medications slowly to decrease symptoms of withdrawal.