Checklist for prescribing opioids for chronic pain

For primary care providers treating adults (18+) with chronic pain ≥3 months, excluding cancer, palliative, and end-of-life care

**CHECKLIST**

**When CONSIDERING long-term opioid therapy**
- Set realistic goals for pain and function based on diagnosis (e.g., walk around the block).
- Check that non-opioid therapies tried and optimized.
- Discuss benefits and risks (e.g., addiction, overdose) with patient.
- Evaluate risk of harm or misuse:
  - Discuss risk factors with patient.
  - Check prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP) data.
  - Check urine drug screen.
- Set criteria for stopping or continuing opioids.
- Assess baseline pain and function (e.g., PEG scale).
- Schedule initial reassessment within 1–4 weeks.
- Prescribe short-acting opioids using lowest dosage on product labeling; match duration to scheduled reassessment.

**If RENEWING without patient visit**
- Check that return visit is scheduled ≤ 3 months from last visit.

**When REASSESSING at return visit**
*Continue opioids only after confirming clinically meaningful improvements in pain and function without significant risks or harm.*
- Assess pain and function (e.g., PEG); compare results to baseline.
- Evaluate risk of harm or misuse:
  - Observe patient for signs of over-sedation or overdose risk.
  - If yes: Taper dose.
  - Check PDMP.
  - Check for opioid use disorder if indicated (e.g., difficulty controlling use).
  - If yes: Refer for treatment.
- Check that non-opioid therapies optimized.
- Determine whether to continue, adjust, taper, or stop opioids.
- Calculate opioid dosage morphine milligram equivalent (MME).
  - If ≥ 50 MME/day total (≥ 50 mg hydrocodone; ≥ 33 mg oxycodone), increase frequency of follow-up; consider offering naloxone.
  - Avoid ≥ 90 MME/day total (≥ 90 mg hydrocodone; ≥ 60 mg oxycodone), or carefully justify; consider specialist referral.
- Schedule reassessment at regular intervals (≤ 3 months).

**REFERENCE**

**EVIDENCE ABOUT OPIOID THERAPY**
- Benefits of long-term opioid therapy for chronic pain not well supported by evidence.
- Short-term benefits small to moderate for pain; inconsistent for function.
- Insufficient evidence for long-term benefits in low back pain, headache, and fibromyalgia.

**NON-OPIOID THERAPIES**
Use alone or combined with opioids, as indicated:
- Non-opioid medications (e.g., NSAIDs, TCAs, SNRIs, anti-convulsants).
- Physical treatments (e.g., exercise therapy, weight loss).
- Behavioral treatment (e.g., CBT).
- Procedures (e.g., intra-articular corticosteroids).

**EVALUATING RISK OF HARM OR MISUSE**
Known risk factors include:
- Illegal drug use; prescription drug use for nonmedical reasons.
- History of substance use disorder or overdose.
- Mental health conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety).
- Sleep-disordered breathing.
- Concurrent benzodiazepine use.

Urine drug testing: Check to confirm presence of prescribed substances and for undisclosed prescription drug or illicit substance use.

Prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP): Check for opioids or benzodiazepines from other sources.

**ASSESSING PAIN & FUNCTION USING PEG SCALE**
PEG score = average 3 individual question scores (30% improvement from baseline is clinically meaningful)

Q1: What number from 0–10 best describes your pain in the past week?
- 0 = “no pain”, 10 = “worst you can imagine”

Q2: What number from 0–10 describes how, during the past week, pain has interfered with your enjoyment of life?
- 0 = “not at all”, 10 = “complete interference”

Q3: What number from 0–10 describes how, during the past week, pain has interfered with your general activity?
- 0 = “not at all”, 10 = “complete interference”

**TO LEARN MORE**
www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/prescribing/guideline.html

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