

Tips for finding opioid alternatives for surgical pain

2 May 2017, by The Associated Press



In this photo taken Feb. 15, 2017, anesthesiologist Dr. Ron Samet performs an ultrasound-guided nerve block at the University of Maryland Medical Center. Bathing the nerves responsible for certain types of pain in a numbing drug allows many patients to avoid or reduce use of potentially addictive painkillers after surgery, one way hospitals are reducing their own dependence on opioids. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

Headed for surgery? Specialists say talking to your doctors ahead of time may turn up ways to control post-operative pain while minimizing use of those problematic painkillers called opioids. Among the advice:

—Ask what to expect. Patients who are overly anxious about impending [pain](#) tend to feel worse.

—Ask your surgeon or the anesthesia team if you qualify for a nerve block or other form of [regional anesthesia](#) that numbs a particular section of the body. A [nerve](#) block administered through a catheter can allow repeated doses to keep a spot numb for days.

Read: [Overcoming Opioids: When pills are a hospital's last resort](#)

—Ask doctors what combinations of non-opioid medications they use to attack pain, a practice called "multimodal analgesia." Options include intravenous doses of acetaminophen or anti-inflammatories, oral anti-seizure drugs that also work on [nerve pain](#), sedatives and injected numbing agents.

—Ask if your hospital offers a program called "enhanced recovery after surgery" that stresses a variety of pain-control and other techniques to get patients eating, drinking and on their feet sooner so they feel better faster.

—If you're being prescribed opioids to take home after surgery, ask how many you really need and what to do with any leftovers so they're not misused. Some hospitals allow sending home only a few days' supply.

—If you've had trouble with any type of [substance abuse](#) in the past, be frank with your doctors. They may bring in a pain or addiction specialist to help craft a customized pain-control plan.

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APA citation: Tips for finding opioid alternatives for surgical pain (2017, May 2) retrieved 10 October 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-05-opioid-alternatives-surgical-pain.html>

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