

To Our Patients: Opioid Prescribing

Vermont Emergency Departments exist to provide care for urgent or life-threatening conditions. Our goal is to provide that care with respect, kindness and compassion. Pain relief is an important part of emergency care. We strive to relieve pain while protecting our patients from the hazards of prescription pain medications.

To provide the best and safest possible care and to help our patients, our communities and our staff understand our approach to pain management, we have set up these guidelines for prescribing narcotics in the Emergency Department.

1. We examine patients for serious medical problems

Our main concern is to identify and treat emergency medical conditions. We usually cannot eliminate chronic pain. Instead, we seek to make pain tolerable and refer patients to someone who is specially trained to diagnose and manage it.

2. There are many effective treatments for pain that do not involve opioids (“narcotics”)

We always look first to non-opioid medication choices for our patients: there are safer and more appropriate treatments for many painful conditions. Immediate release opioids can be helpful in acutely painful conditions, but are not to be relied on for long-lasting pain control.

3. When we consider narcotics, we take steps to keep patients safe.

We may talk with your primary care provider and we will review online prescription records to assess the risk of treatment. We would expect that you follow up with your primary care provider for further management of your painful condition.

4. We provide the shortest effective course of treatment.

Most painful emergency conditions improve in a few days. If we choose to prescribe an opioid, it is generally for a short course of up to 3 days. Chronic pain should be managed by a primary care provider or pain management specialist. The longer the treatment is, the greater the risk of unwanted side effects and addiction.

5. It is your responsibility to guard your medications and take them responsibly.

Anyone else who takes your medication runs the risk of addiction or overdose. Keep your medications safe. Communities often have “drug take-back days”: look for these to dispose of your unused medications.

If you need additional help with pain management or addiction beyond what our emergency department can safely provide, we would be happy to give you referral information to pain management specialists and rehabilitation facilities in Vermont who can get you the ongoing care you need.