The effects of opioid misuse on the body
- Opioid addiction, part 5

Tolerance
Opioid drugs, when used repeatedly over time, can cause tolerance. Tolerance happens when the person no longer gets effects from the drug as strongly as at first. With tolerance, a drug user needs a higher dose to get the same effect. This is because the brain responds less to opioids over time. Tolerance increases the high risk of overdose during a relapse after a period in recovery. Drug users may not realize that during the time they stopped taking drugs, they may have lost their tolerance. They may take the same dose they used before quitting. This is likely to cause an overdose, because the person can no longer tolerate a dose this high.

Withdrawal
With repeated use of prescription or illegal opioids, the brain lowers the amount of natural opioid-like substances that it produces. This new low level of natural opioid-like substances is part of the reason for the symptoms people have when they stop abusing drugs. This is called withdrawal.

Breathing Problems
Overdosing on opioids can lead to slower breathing. At high doses, breathing may stop. This can result in permanent damage to the brain and body, or death.

Intestinal Problems
Opioids can cause serious long term constipation. This increases the risk of the intestines either becoming blocked or getting a hole in the wall of the intestine.

Immune System
Opioids can affect the immune system, making it harder to fight infections.

Liver Damage
Many opioid painkillers are produced in combination with a common over-the-counter painkiller called acetaminophen. A popular brand name is Tylenol. By taking potentially high doses of acetaminophen with opioids in this way, the user is at greater risk of experiencing liver damage. Excessively drinking alcohol also impacts the liver. Using opioids and drinking can increase your risk of liver damage.
**Blood Vessel Damage**

Street drugs can be mixed with other substances. Particles of these substances can travel through the body and damage small blood vessels which in turn may damage many different organs.

**Infections**

Injection of drugs can cause things that can make you sick to directly enter the body. This can lead to infections such as hepatitis C, HIV, and heart infections. Needle sharing is a cause of many of these infections.

People and their family members who are dealing with mental or substance use disorders, or both, can call the National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357. This is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service. It is available in English and Spanish. The National Helpline provides referrals to local treatment centers, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free brochures and other information.