In nature, opioids are found in the seed pod of the opium poppy plant. Opioid medications can be:

- **Natural**, made from the plant
- **Semi-synthetic**, modified in a lab from the plant
- **Fully synthetic**, completely made in a lab

Opioids attach to cells in the brain and the body. Some of those cells control digestion, pain, and other functions. The brain’s natural opioids are called **endorphins**. Endorphins relieve pain. For certain medical conditions, doctors may prescribe opioid medications to relieve pain.

For centuries, opioids were used to treat pain as well as common ailments such as cough and diarrhea. In modern times, opioid medications are used to treat short term pain, which is called **acute pain**.

Since the 1990s, opioids have also been used to treat **chronic** or long-lasting pain. Research is not clear about the long-term effectiveness of opioids for treating chronic pain. After using opioids for a long time, some people experience worsening pain or increased sensitivity to pain. This is known as **hyperalgesia**.

In addition to relieving pain, opioids affect the brain’s reward system. This affects the parts of the brain that control feelings of pleasure, which can make people feel euphoric or **high**. Some people take opioids just to get high.

Opioids include:
- Medicines available legally by prescription
- Illegal drugs

Common prescription opioids prescribed for severe pain include:
- Oxycodone, known as OxyContin, Percodan, or Percocet
- Hydrocodone, known as Vicodin, Lortab, or Lorcet
- Morphine
- Fentanyl, known as Duragesic
- Methadone
- Codeine
When used for a short time, and taken as prescribed, opioids are safe for most people. However, those who take prescription opioids for pain can be at risk of becoming addicted to them.

Some opioids are produced and sold illegally. Though also available by prescription, the powerful synthetic opioid **Fentanyl** is produced and sold illegally. **Heroin** is another illegal opioid.

When opioids are snorted, smoked, or injected, the drug gets to the brain very quickly and produces a different high than when taken as prescribed. These illegal opioids pose great risk of addiction and overdose.

Be sure to get answers to any questions you have about opioids or substance use disorders. Your public health department, health care provider, and public library can help.

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