What Happens To Your Brain When You Use Prescription Pain Medications (Opioids)?

By The Professionals At Robert Alexander Center

As with all forms of medications, when they're used correctly and as intended they can go a long way in achieving what they were meant to.

Opioids can be highly effective in treating mild to severe pain and also persistent coughs or diarrhea.

Individual results can vary from person to person, but generally speaking, the drug has a calming effect on the brain and this causes feelings of pleasure, relief and calmness.

So How Do Opioids Work And What Are The Effects On The Brain?

Endorphins are the "happy buzz" hormones that are released in our brains when we're experiencing activities that cause pleasure. These can be hobbies, working out, sports activities, singing, writing, acting – whatever it is that we enjoy. This is why they have such a powerful impact on our brains as they govern our "pleasure center."

Now, when opioids enter the brain, they bind themselves to opioid receptors. These receptors are located throughout the brain and in other parts of the body that have an impact on feelings of pain and pleasure and also the parts of our bodies that regulate breathing. In addition to this, opioids affect the brains' "reward circuit." This is the part of the brain that rewards you for achieving your goals or winning at sports or in the gym. You get little "hits" of dopamine that make you feel good.

Now, when you take opioids in sufficient quantities they cause your brain to get a massive hit of dopamine which floods your body with pleasure, numbs physical and mental pain, generally leaving you feeling euphoric. But, our bodies were not designed for that much dopamine, so over time the natural pathways that exist between our pleasure, work and reward centers get eroded and instead our brains learn to get these new hits of dopamine from the drug we're taking.

Over an extended period, our brain wants more and more of the drug and a physical addiction develops.

Can You Overdose On Opioids?

Yes, you can, and this will almost always lead to death, so this is something that you need to take very seriously.

Taking just one large dose can cause your body to stop breathing and if you don't get help in time, you will die or you could even develop brain damage and other mental or physical long-term problems.

You should call 911 immediately at the first signs of an overdose. Typical signs of an opioid overdose include:

- Slow breathing or the appearance of not breathing
- Blue lips or fingernails
- Cold and damp skin
- Uncontrollable shaking
- A gurgling sound coming from the throat
- Vomiting
- Slipping in and out of consciousness
- The head "bobbing" back and forth limply

I Need Some Help, What Now?

Only you will know when you are ready to get some help. You should know, finding the right treatment, as early as possible, can save your life and help you restore your relationships and bring some healing to you and those around you. Unfortunately, opioid abuse regularly turns into heroin abuse and addiction and this is where things can get very complicated.

What Kinds Of Treatment Are Available?

It's great that you're thinking about getting some help. We'll be more than happy to walk this path with you and you should know. You're not alone. There is no shame or disappointment in getting the help you need when you need it.

When you have been seen by one of our team members, your treatment plan will be discussed and planned with you. You will need a detoxification period and this has to be carefully managed.

You will also be offered different types of ongoing treatment and management. Either intensive outpatient care where you don't physically stay on the premises, but are required to attend regular meetings, withdrawal management programs, detoxification care, counseling and other forms of psychological treatment.

Once you've been through that period or if you have not been using for a long time, you may be offered regular outpatient treatment and in both cases, all of these options should be discussed with you.

It's important to realize that none of this can happen without your consent and 100% commitment. All over the United States, there is an alarming increase in these kinds of substance abuse/misuse issues, but that means that you're not alone and you will always be able to find someone that you can connect with and relate to.

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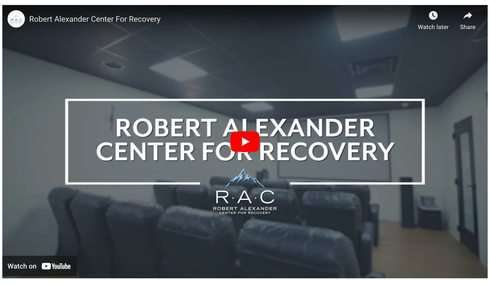
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