



Treatment of opioid dependence

There are four different ways to treat opioid dependence. These four treatments fall into two subgroups:

- Detoxification, followed by counseling and support groups, but no medicine
- Medication-assisted treatment where one of three different medications are used. These medications typically are:
 - Naltrexone
 - Buprenorphine
 - Methadone

Each method of treatment has its own benefits and risks.

Detoxification, followed by counseling and support groups

At first, this method seems to be the most attractive. It does not involve the ongoing use of medications. In fact, this method is the least effective and may be the most dangerous.

An individual goes through a very difficult detoxification process, called “detox”. In detox, a person, under medical supervision, stops using opioids experiencing a painful and uncomfortable withdrawal. Withdrawal effects include aching body, runny eyes and nose, stomach cramping, vomiting and diarrhea. These symptoms will last from up to three weeks.

Following the detox, the individual begins counseling and/or 12-step programs. Unfortunately, the pills have caused serious changes in the brain. The person who was addicted the person no longer can maintain the right balance of brain chemicals, such as endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine. This can lead to ongoing fatigue, depression, anxiety and a craving for opioid medications. Because of these symptoms, many people relapse.

A study from the Veterans Administration showed that of the people admitted to detox and intensive counseling and support, only 5 percent remained off of their drugs after 3 months. (Davison et al., 2006)

Medication assisted treatment – Naltrexone

Naltrexone is an injectable medication that blocks the effects of opioid medications. It is given as shot into the muscle once a month. Naltrexone blocks the effects of opioid medications. If an individual in recovery relapses and takes an opioid medication, he or she will not feel the effects of it. Naltrexone does not correct the chemical imbalance caused by the addiction. It is not as effective in helping people maintain sobriety as methadone or buprenorphine, but naltrexone it does not cause any impairment and is very safe.

Medication assisted treatment – buprenorphine

Buprenorphine, taken once a day, is an opioid medication and is considered replacement therapy. Since it is an opioid medication, it helps to correct much of the imbalance of brain neurotransmitters. It is very effective in treating addiction, including in most people with opioid dependence. Buprenorphine can be prescribed by physicians who have had special training.

For more information, visit nsc.org/rxpainkillers

Medication assisted treatment – methadone

Methadone is considered the “gold-standard” in treatment of opioid dependence. It is an opioid medication and, like buprenorphine, is considered replacement therapy. Methadone is the most successful treatment for opioid dependence. It is only provided through special clinics that are highly regulated by state and federal governments.

Works Cited

Davison, J. W., Sweeney, M. L., Bush, K. R., Davis Correale, T. M., Calsyn, D. a, Reoux, J. P., ... Kivlahan, D. R. (2006). Outpatient treatment engagement and abstinence rates following inpatient opioid detoxification. *Journal of Addictive Diseases*, 25(4), 27–35. doi:10.1300/J069v25n04_03