

# “Opioids are Not Effective for Treating Chronic Pain.”

## *SCOPE of Pain Colleague to Colleague Podcast #17*

Welcome back to the *SCOPE of Pain* Podcast Series. This is Dr. Daniel Alford, Professor of Medicine and Course Director for the Boston University School of Medicine *SCOPE of Pain* program. We will now discuss what we know and don't know about the efficacy of opioids for chronic pain.

Your medical director states that all patients on chronic opioid therapy should be tapered, as there is no evidence that opioids are effective for chronic pain. So, what is the actual efficacy of opioids for chronic pain?

Unfortunately, we do not have any long-term efficacy trials of opioids for chronic pain; all we have are short-term studies. There was a recent systematic review published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which examined the efficacy of opioids for chronic pain. Unfortunately, the durations of these studies were less than six months.

However, the review included 96 randomized clinical trials of over 26,000 patients with chronic noncancer pain. The meta-analysis of these high-quality studies found that the use of opioids compared with a placebo was associated with significantly less pain and significantly improved physical functioning, but the magnitude of the association was small.

They also looked at comparisons of opioids with non-opioids and found that the benefits for pain and functioning were similar, although the evidence was from low to moderate quality studies.

And finally, a recent 12-month, randomized clinical trial, including patients from Veterans Affairs primary care clinics with moderate to severe chronic back pain or pain from hip or knee osteoarthritis compared opioids versus non-opioid treatment. The trial found opioids not superior to non-opioids for improving function related to musculoskeletal pain over 12 months.

However, a limitation of the study was that 89% of eligible patients declined to be enrolled in the study. Therefore, for the 11% of patients who agreed to take part in the study, opioids were no better than non-opioids over 12 months. For the 89% who declined to participate, it's not known how opioids compared to non-opioids for chronic musculoskeletal pain.

Opioid efficacy and the risks in treating chronic pain are addressed in detail in the *SCOPE of Pain* program. You are not alone in facing these challenging issues.

Thanks for listening.

Be sure to check back often, as new Podcasts will be added throughout the year.

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