

# Opioid Withdrawal: Time Course and Symptoms

## Who Is Likely to Experience Withdrawal Symptoms?

- It's hard to predict whether a particular person will experience withdrawal or how severe their symptoms will be. Generally speaking, **anyone who consistently takes an opioid for two weeks or longer is at risk.**
- Factors predicting **more severe withdrawal** include:
  - More consistent use (eg, every day as opposed to a few times a week)
  - Higher quantities used
  - Shorter-acting opioids (eg, two weeks of daily hydrocodone use will likely lead to worse withdrawal than two weeks of daily methadone use)
- Naloxone (Narcan) or naltrexone (Vivitrol) can trigger immediate (precipitated) withdrawal if given to someone who has opioids in their system.

## What Are Common Opioid Withdrawal Symptoms?

- Mnemonic for remembering opioid withdrawal symptoms: **FLU OPRS**
  - **F**lu-like symptoms: Fever, sweating, and chills
  - **L**eg movements: Restless legs, kicking movements
  - **U**nwell feeling: General malaise or feeling unwell
  - **O**veractive reflexes: Twitching or spasms
  - **P**ain: Muscle aches, stomach cramping, and bone pain
  - **R**uns: Diarrhea and other gastrointestinal symptoms
  - **S**leep problems: Insomnia

## When Does Withdrawal Begin and How Long Does It Last?

- Withdrawal usually starts after two or three half-lives of whatever opioid was used. The chart below is a rough guide for the expected time course of withdrawal; individual courses can be highly variable.

Drug	Withdrawal Onset	Peak of Withdrawal Symptoms	Duration of Withdrawal Syndrome
Fentanyl	3–12 hours	12–36 hours	5–7 days
Heroin	8–24 hours	36–72 hours	7–10 days
Short-acting analgesics (oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine)	6–12 hours	12–36 hours	5–7 days
Long-acting analgesics (OxyContin, MS Contin, Opana)	8–24 hours	36–72 hours	7–10 days
Buprenorphine	1–2 days	3–5 days	10–20 days
Methadone	1–3 days	4–7 days	2–4 weeks

## How Can You Measure Severity of Withdrawal?

- The **Clinical Opiate Withdrawal Scale (COWS)** is an 11-item clinician-administered scale that can be used in inpatient or outpatient settings. Its most common usage is to determine when a patient is ready for buprenorphine induction.
- The **Subjective Opiate Withdrawal Scale (SOWS)** is a self-administered version of the COWS that patients undergoing home induction can use to measure degree of withdrawal.