



Pain Management at Mammoth Hospital

By Dr. Craig Burrows, Chief Medical Officer, Mammoth Hospital

Opioid use in the United States has reached epidemic proportions. In 2014, the Center for Disease Control, or the CDC, reported that more people died from drug overdoses than in any year on record, and that six out of ten of those deaths involved an opioid. Since 1999, the rate of opioid related overdoses has nearly quadrupled. On an average day in this country, more than 650,000 opioid prescriptions are dispensed, 3,900 people start using opioid for non-medical reasons, 580 people start using heroin, and 78 people die from an opioid related overdose. If those numbers are alarming to you, they should be – this is some scary stuff!

Opioid dependence and abuse often starts innocently enough. You suffer an injury - this may be from a car accident, a broken bone, or a muscle strain. It may even be the result of a medical condition that leads to unexplained pain in your joints all the time. As part of the management of this pain, we are given a prescription for an opioid, like Percocet or Norco, to help you feel better. And many times, it works! But when the medication wears off, the pain comes back, and we need more. Over time, the duration the medication works becomes shorter and shorter, and we find we need more and more of the same prescription to achieve the same level of relief. And after not too long, we are now dependent on the opioid to get through the day. The start of a history of opioid abuse can be that simple.

In response to this huge healthcare problem, the CDC



came out with guidelines in the beginning of 2016 for safe prescribing of opioids for chronic pain management. The medical staff at Mammoth Hospital, wanting only what is best for our patients, adopted these guidelines into its policies later that same year. This represents a change in the way we all think about pain management, from “what can we do to make the pain go away,” to “what can we do to make your pain manageable.” In a lot of ways, pain management is all about the management of expectations. It is not realistic to expect that a chronic pain condition is going to go away completely, but it is realistic to expect that together with your provider, you will develop a plan that will allow you to keep your pain under control and allow you to continue to function at a normal level without needing to be drugged all the time.

This plan of attack is multifaceted, and starts with a discussion with your provider about your pain, and how it can best be managed. Part of this plan may include

working with our care coordination team to help keep you on track. It may also be suggested that you work with a physical therapist, participate in yoga, or have regular massage treatments. Chronic pain often leads to feelings of fatigue and depression, so working with a behavioral therapist may also be of benefit. Other medications besides opioids may help better manage your symptoms, such as low dose antidepressants, anti-inflammatories (Motrin), neuropathic pain medications (Gabapentin), and even Tylenol. If you do require an opioid, your provider will talk with you about a strategy of how to taper off this medication either completely, or to the lowest dose possible.

As part of the team approach to pain management, it is critically important to remember that you, the patient are a key member of that team. The approach to chronic pain management works best if you are a participant rather than a bystander. You play a key role in creating your own successful outcome. Some of your responsibilities will include talking to your provider about what you are feeling, what is working, and what isn't working. Because of the risk involved with taking opioids, you will be asked to sign a pain agreement. Among other things, this contract states that you will receive medications only from your one agreed upon provider, and that you avoid potentially lethal combinations of medications. You will also be asked to provide a urine drug screen. This is to make certain you are taking your opioids as prescribed, and that you are not taking other drugs you should be avoiding. Lastly, refills or increases in doses will not be approved over the phone. You will need to schedule a follow-up appointment to refill your medications!

Change is always hard, regardless of what it has to do with. And the approach to chronic pain management is no exception. But we at Mammoth Hospital believe that this is the right approach, and is more likely to result in a successful outcome for our patients who suffer with pain and opioid dependence. With a better handle on your chronic pain, you will add years to your life and life to your years!