

## What to do if you've been denied appropriate pain management

As the leading chronic pain patient advocacy group, U.S. Pain Foundation is committed to protecting access to vital pain management options and preventing pain medication abuse. We believe it is possible to achieve both goals through balanced reform.

Unfortunately, many recent reforms at the federal and state level are causing unnecessary suffering for patients with pain. We routinely hear from patients who have been forced completely off their opioid pain medications without legitimate reasons, forced to a lower dose that doesn't treat their pain effectively, or denied the right to try necessary pain medications from the get-go, despite the possibility for relief.

This guide aims to help patients and their loved ones who face these terrible situations. Please know that this guide represents suggestions only; ultimately, you are responsible for the steps you decide to take to address prescribing issues. U.S. Pain cannot guarantee a positive outcome and is not responsible for what occurs between you and your prescribing clinician.

### Addressing unfair restrictions

1. You may be incredibly scared and frustrated. Do your best to stay calm while speaking with your clinicians; becoming angry or violent will only make matters worse. If it's easier, alert a family member or friend who might be able to speak to the prescribing clinician for you.
2. Request specific information for the reason the medication is being refused or inappropriately tapered so you can address concerns in a calm manner.
3. Also ask about how to treat withdrawal symptoms and about alternative pain management options. You have a right to these options.
4. If the prescribing clinician is not receptive to your requests for information and guidance, ask to speak to a different clinician at the practice or to the clinician's supervisor. If that doesn't work and you have a good relationship with a different clinician from another clinic or department (such as a primary care physician), contact them and respectfully ask if they might speak to the prescribing clinician on your behalf.
5. Consider sending a message by mail or email to the prescribing clinician and their supervisor outlining your perspective of the situation, why it was unfair and/or harmful, and asking them to reconsider.

### Managing possible withdrawal

1. First and foremost is your physical safety. Unmanaged, abrupt refusal of pain medication can be unsafe. If you are experiencing mild withdrawal symptoms--which may include low energy,

irritability, nausea, hot and cold sweats, and other issues--there are certain steps you can take at home to make yourself more comfortable. But even if your symptoms are manageable, you should always contact your primary care physician or pain care specialist to let them know what is going on (whoever is not the clinician who refused the medication or tapered improperly) and see if they have suggestions. If you are experiencing more severe withdrawal, such as a rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, or extreme nausea, go to the emergency room. Know that they will likely not be able to prescribe you opioid pain medications, but they can help treat and manage withdrawal symptoms.

2. Be mindful of your emotional state. Being denied pain care can make you feel powerless and unworthy. Please know you are not alone. Take care of yourself, and lean on loved ones and support groups. If you are feeling suicidal, immediately call a suicide/prevention crisis hotline at 800-784-2433 or 800-273-8255. You can also access a directory of support groups here: <http://www.uspainfoundation.org/resources/support-groups/>.

### **Managing increased pain**

1. A sudden, unmanaged removal of opioid pain medication may cause your pain level to spike. You will need to seek a new source of pain relief and, potentially, a new clinician. If possible, try to find a clinician who is knowledgeable about many different pain management options and is experienced with treating complex and serious pain. For help locating a specialist, visit <https://www.uspainfoundation.org/find-a-specialist>.
2. Until a new pain management physician or other treating clinician can be found, your immediate goal will be to reduce your pain to a level that enables you to function. It's important not to give up--there are many options out there, it's just a matter of finding what works for you. U.S. Pain's "Living with Pain" webpage can help you find new treatments to consider, including other categories of medications, complementary therapies, and self-management techniques: <https://www.uspainfoundation.org/living-with-pain/>.
3. If it is legal in your state, many people with chronic pain have good results with medical cannabis (marijuana). You will need to obtain a medical cannabis card (each state has different rules), then find a dispensary with personnel who can advise you on the most appropriate product for your condition. To learn more about medical cannabis, visit <https://www.uspainfoundation.org/resources/medical-cannabis>.
4. You should also explore complementary therapy options, many of which can be done from home and/or without a doctor's referral. To learn more about various complementary therapy options, ranging from massage, to acupuncture, to aromatherapy, visit our "Complementary Therapies" page: <https://www.uspainfoundation.org/living-with-pain/complementary-therapies/>.

### **Filing complaints**

1. File a complaint with your state medical board. Name all the clinicians, with their practice addresses and phone numbers, who refused to either prescribe opioids for illegitimate reasons and/or did not properly taper you. Keep your summary of the situation to one page or less. Try to be calm and objective in tone; do not insult anyone or use inappropriate language. Ask a loved one to review your

statement before sending. If relevant and you feel comfortable doing so, include medical records that illustrate your point. To contact your state medical board, visit <https://www.fsmb.org/state-medical-boards/contacts>.

2. If an insurance company decision is the reason for the denial, file a complaint with your state insurance commissioner. To contact your state insurance commissioner, visit [http://www.naic.org/state\\_web\\_map.htm](http://www.naic.org/state_web_map.htm).
3. If you believe you experienced physical harm due to your prescribing clinician's actions, consider contacting an attorney about malpractice.

### **Making sure your story is heard**

1. Repurpose your complaint and statement into a letter or email to your legislators at the state and federal levels and to the governor of your state. You can also make a phone call if that's easier. This is very important because these people represent you and react to the complaints of their constituents; laws and regulations have recently been adopted in some states that have had the unintended consequences of frightening clinicians into refusing or limiting pain treatment. If you send a letter or email, keep it to one page. Briefly tell them your story and urge them to better protect pain patients. You can find your elected representatives here: [http://act.commoncause.org/site/PageServer?pagename=sunlight\\_advocacy\\_list\\_page](http://act.commoncause.org/site/PageServer?pagename=sunlight_advocacy_list_page).
2. We also recommend contacting local and/or national media (newspapers, radio stations, or TV news) and sharing your story. You could also write your own op-ed and submit it to your local paper. The more these stories get out and the public becomes aware of the prevalence of chronic pain and how widespread this problem is the more likely this situation is to spurn change. You could also contact a publication that specializes in pain, such as *Pain News Network* or *National Pain Report*, that may be interested in publishing your story.