

# Emergency Department Buprenorphine Initiation



## Additional Clinical Guidance

- Opioid use disorder (OUD) is a treatable health condition. It is best treated with methadone or buprenorphine.
- Buprenorphine and methadone are life-saving medications for OUD that reduce the risk of all-cause mortality and overdose death by over 50%.
- Recovery often requires multiple treatment attempts. A repeat encounter is not a treatment failure, but an opportunity to reinstitute potentially life-saving medication.
- If patients continue to use other opioids while on methadone or buprenorphine, a higher dose may be needed to manage their symptoms. Therapeutic dosing should be guided by adequate management of withdrawal and cravings.
- Opioid withdrawal is excruciating. Without swift and adequate intervention, patients may self-direct discharge and be at risk for overdose.
- Patients with OUD are highly stigmatized. Stigma prevents people from seeking care and worsens health outcomes. Providers should challenge biases to provide compassionate, evidence-based care.

## Assessment

- Assess the Clinical Opiate Withdrawal Scale (COWS) score before administering buprenorphine. For this initiation approach, only administer buprenorphine if the patient has signs of withdrawal.
- Reassess vitals, COWS, and subjective experience of withdrawal within 30 minutes of buprenorphine administration.

## Labs

- Drug testing is not necessary to initiate treatment for OUD.
- If drug testing is performed for clinical reasons, obtain informed consent.

## Pharmacotherapy

- Buprenorphine is a partial opioid agonist that helps to minimize withdrawal and lessen opioid cravings.
- Buprenorphine has minimal effect on respiratory drive, making respiratory depression unlikely even at higher doses.
- Buprenorphine has high receptor affinity, allowing it to out-compete other opioids. This competitive binding can precipitate withdrawal because it will rapidly replace the more potent opioid that is present. This is why patients should be in withdrawal before starting buprenorphine with this method.

- Competitive binding also reduces overdose risk by blocking other opioids. Even a single dose provides protection for at least 24 hours, during the high-risk period after discharge.
- Doses should be adjusted based on symptoms— if the patient has ongoing withdrawal symptoms or cravings to use, a dose increase should be considered.

## Special populations

- If a patient is pregnant, refer to the [care of OUD in pregnancy protocol](#).
- If a patient is under 18, refer to the [buprenorphine initiation in adolescents protocol](#).

## Polysubstance use

- Active stimulant intoxication can falsely elevate the COWS score.
- Buprenorphine administration may unmask symptoms of stimulant intoxication.
- Polysubstance use is never a contraindication for initiating buprenorphine or methadone.

## Administration

- Because buprenorphine is a partial agonist, if the first dose is administered too soon after recent full agonist opioid use in a patient with opioid dependence, there is a risk of precipitated withdrawal. This is a sudden worsening of withdrawal symptoms after buprenorphine administration. If this occurs, give additional doses of buprenorphine and adjunct medications to alleviate withdrawal symptoms.
- Inform the patient of the risk of precipitated withdrawal. Ask them to report right away if their symptoms worsen, reassure them that they will receive immediate treatment if this occurs.
- Administering buprenorphine:
  - Buprenorphine comes in film and tablet forms, and both must be taken sublingually. The medication is poorly absorbed in the stomach. It must be taken correctly to receive the benefit.
  - The patient should let the medication dissolve fully under their tongue. This typically takes 5-10 minutes, but sometimes longer. Drinking water prior to administration can help it dissolve faster. Many patients find the taste unpleasant. One way to know that the medication is dissolved and absorbed is when the taste subsides.
  - Patients should not eat, drink, or talk while the medication is dissolving.
  - To prevent oral decay, instruct the patient to rinse their mouth with water 30 minutes after administration.

## Discharge planning

- Help the patient schedule a follow-up appointment. Hospitals enrolled in ScalaNW can call the 24/7 appointment scheduling line and receive a confirmed date, time, and location for MOUD follow up appointment during the 10-minute phone call.

- For hospitals not enrolled in ScalaNW, the Washington Recovery Helpline MOUD Locator ([online](#) or at 1-866-789-1511) is a useful resource for finding OUD treatment in Washington.
- Provide the patient with a buprenorphine prescription to last until their scheduled outpatient appointment. When possible, prescribe 3 additional days beyond the appointment date to allow for barriers or rescheduling. If no appointment is scheduled, provide at least 7-14 days of medication to give the patient time to secure an appointment.
  - Patients can call the Washington Telebuprenorphine Hotline (206-289-0287) if they run out of medication prior to their follow up appointment.
- Provide the patient with discharge instructions that include the time of the last dose and when to take the next dose. Ensure the patient understands the importance of taking buprenorphine at around the same time every day.
- Many patients need adjunct medications to control withdrawal symptoms until they stabilize on buprenorphine. If needed, provide prescriptions for adjunct withdrawal management medications to cover at least 7 days.
- In Washington, emergency departments are required to dispense naloxone to patients with OUD or others who are at risk of opioid overdose, in compliance with SB5195. Ensure patient is discharged with naloxone in hand.
- When possible, connect patients with supports such as social workers, care navigators, or peers to improve patient experience and strengthen linkage to care.

## Patient education

### Educate the patient about:

- Buprenorphine administration:
  - Must be administered under the tongue for proper absorption.
  - It can take 5-10 minutes for the medication to fully absorb. Avoid eating, drinking, smoking, or talking during this time.
  - Drinking water prior to administration can help it dissolve faster.
  - To prevent oral decay, rinse mouth with water 30 minutes after administration.
- The risks of combining sedatives with buprenorphine, which can cause respiratory depression.
- The importance of avoiding driving or operating machinery until accustomed to the medication. Provide work notes if needed.
- Overdose prevention strategies. Ensure the patient and their support system understand when and how to use naloxone.
- The risks of change in use patterns, which can alter tolerance and increase risk of opioid overdose.