

Identifying and managing drug-seeking behavior in patients

Prescribing opioid analgesics can come with certain risks; however, there are ways to differentiate between a patient experiencing acute pain and a patient displaying drug-seeking behavior.



Drug-seeking behavior may look and sound like^{1,2}:



- Knowing or asking for opioid medication by brand name
- Refusing non-opioid alternatives or insisting that non-opioid alternatives do not work for them
- Exaggerating symptoms and pain
- Regurgitating textbook symptoms
- Resisting lab tests for confirmation of symptoms or condition
- Reluctance to share medical history or information
- Mood disturbances, mood swings, or lack of impulse control
- Coming in toward the end of office hours
- Repeated “loss” of prescriptions

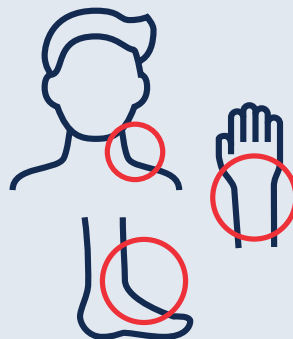
It could be helpful to also look out for physical signs of addiction. Signs such as¹:



- Overly constricted or dilated pupils



- Tremors or excess sweating



- “Track” marks or scarring around the neck, forearms, wrists, armpits, feet, or ankles

When confronted with a person who you suspect is displaying drug-seeking behavior, make sure to do the following²⁻⁴:



- Administer a thorough examination according to the ailment or symptoms that the patient is describing
- Request the patient's picture ID or a social security card with another form of ID. Make photocopies to place in the patient's file
- Confirm the patient's address during each appointment
- Ask the patient if they have had experiences with drug abuse, misuse, or addiction in the past
- Always conduct a thorough drug screening of the patient

Please see other side for suggested responses to drug-seeking behavior.

Knowing how to respond when confronted with drug-seeking behavior can be challenging. Here are some suggestions based on common scenarios:



I'm in severe pain; can you prescribe [brand name opioid with specific milligrams]?

Understand that this patient might actually be experiencing pain or maybe experienced pain relief before with this specific brand and dosage. Conduct a thorough drug screening. Ask about other related symptoms. Order lab tests that may confirm underlying ailment causing pain. Weigh the risks of prescribing an opioid analgesic to this patient.²⁻⁴

Why aren't you prescribing an opioid? Don't you care that I am in pain?

Empathize with the patient's pain. This patient may have an idea of the type of pain relief they want or have experienced before with an opioid. Conduct a thorough drug screening. Be sure to explain the benefits of using a non-opioid analgesic as a first-line defense as compared to first prescribing an opioid analgesic.^{3,4}

I have experienced addiction before, but I am now sober.

Commend the patient on their sobriety. Explain the increased risks associated with prescribing an opioid analgesic to a person who has previously experienced addiction. Try to underscore the importance of avoiding a relapse even with prescription medications. Reiterate the importance and benefits of first trying a non-opioid analgesic to manage their pain.³

I've already told you about my symptoms; why do I need to undergo testing?

Explain the way testing may confirm those symptoms; reveal a deeper, underlying condition that may be responsible for the patient's pain; or expose something different than the symptoms they presented. Ask the patient for their detailed medical history. Conduct a thorough drug screening. Further assess any inconsistencies.^{2,3,5}

If you suspect that your patient is experiencing drug addiction, abuse, or misuse, there are resources available that may help:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
1-800-622-HELP (4357)

National Drug Helpline
1-844-289-0879

Crisis Text Line
Text HOME to 741741

1. Kipnis S, Post KW. *Substance Abuse and Treatment: Information for Practitioners*. New York State Department of Health; 2009.

2. Drug Enforcement Administration Office of Diversion Control. *Recognizing the Drug Abuser*. US Department of Justice; 1999.

3. Kaye AD, Jones MR, Kaye AM, et al. Prescription opioid abuse in chronic pain: an updated review of opioid abuse predictors and strategies to curb opioid abuse (Part 2). *Pain Physician*. 2017;(20):S111-S133.

4. Fischer MA, McKinlay JB, Katz JN, et al. Physician assessments of drug seeking behavior: a mixed methods study. *PLOS ONE*. 2017;12(6):e0178690. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0178690.

5. Songer DM. *Evaluation of Substance Abuse Measures in Identifying Drug Seeking Behavior*. Indiana State University. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. 2021. 28646082.