
Educating Patients Regarding Pain Management and Safe Opioid Use After Surgery

A Narrative Review

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Abstract and Introduction

Abstract

In recent years, there have been escalating concerns related to the opioid epidemic. With a steadily increasing opioid supply, it is critical to provide proper education to patients who are prescribed these medications. Education should be emphasized as a means of ensuring safe use and potentially as a strategy for curbing the opioid supply. Patients who undergo surgery are frequently prescribed opioids for postoperative pain; however, the content and delivery of information related to usage is inconsistent and often inadequate. Lack of education on postoperative pain management and opioid use places patients at risk for poor compliance and worse pain control. Furthermore, patients are often not properly educated on opioid-related side effects and risks or about safe behaviors when taking medications. The majority of patients are also not informed about how to store and dispose of leftover medications. Patients who are prescribed opioids require education preoperatively to cover the topics of pain management, opioid-related side effects, and risks, storage, and disposal. Evidence from various studies demonstrates that educational interventions improve knowledge and potentially lead to safer behaviors and reduced opioid use. Education can be provided in various formats with each having unique advantages and limitations.

Introduction

Opioids are frequently prescribed to treat pain after surgery, and while these medications may be effective analgesics, they are also susceptible to misuse and addiction. There are growing concerns that prescription opioids contribute to the existing opioid supply and become potential sources for abuse.^[1,2] In fact, opioids are often abused by those using medications not prescribed to them but obtained from friends or relatives.^[3,4]

Unfortunately, many patients who undergo surgery may not be given adequate information about opioids and strategies for postoperative pain management.^[5-7] In addressing the opioid epidemic, there needs to be a greater emphasis on educating patients so that they may learn to use opioids appropriately. Patients should be educated specifically on how to use opioids to treat postoperative pain and also informed regarding opioid-related side effects, risks, and proper disposal. The goal should be to reduce reliance on opioids, lower risks of addiction, and ultimately limit the supply of opioids that are liable to be misused.

We explore the existing literature to investigate the effects of patient education and current gaps that are present. We then present information that may help guide patients and lead to safer opioid handling and consider approaches to education and areas of research moving forward.

Influence of Education on Postoperative Pain and Opioid use

There is evidence that preoperative counseling and education can shape patients' expectations, attitudes, and behaviors related to opioid use. In a study by Sugai et al,^[8] patients undergoing ambulatory surgery were randomly assigned to education sessions 2 weeks before their procedure. They were given both oral and written information focusing on the negative side effects of opioids, role of exogenous opioid in the processing of pain, and importance of nonopioid analgesics. Patients who received this education were less likely to request opioids postoperatively while actually reporting lower average pain scores and shorter duration of pain.^[8]