

How to properly use, and then wean off of Suboxone and Subutex

Dr. Robert Ben Mitchell, D.O. 16375 NE 18 Ave., #310, North Miami Beach, FL 33162, 786-262-5750, www.Trafn.com

The active ingredient in Suboxone and Subutex is buprenorphine. Buprenorphine is an opioid class chemical with mild pain relieving qualities but very strong binding capacity at opioid receptors. The strong binding capacity makes your body think a strong pain reliever is on board when it isn't, thereby preventing cravings and withdrawals.

Suboxone has an additional ingredient - naloxone. Naloxone prevents euphoria from occurring if the pill is crushed and then snorted or injected.. When used as directed (sublingual) there is little euphoric potential from either Suboxone or Subutex. However, if buprenorphine is injected or snorted, euphoria may occur. Suboxone was made to prevent euphoria in patients who might snort or inject it. Subutex is for patients who are not prone to this abuse.

Are you trading one addiction for another when you use Suboxone or Subutex? No. You already had opioid dependence when you began this treatment. Opioid dependence is a psychiatric diagnosis made using the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV). Therefore, the real problem in opioid dependence is not the drugs, but the mind.

How do you recover from opioid dependence? While you were using recreational drugs, you trained yourself mentally and physically to turn to the "happy pills" (opioids in this case) whenever you were in pain: physical pain or emotional pain. That's why the real problem isn't the drugs, but your pain: physical and emotional. Therefore, the real cure for opioid dependence is to develop new coping mechanisms (other than the happy pills) to use when you suffer any physical or emotional problems. This is where counseling comes in, because in counseling you develop the skills (coping mechanisms) needed to defeat opioid dependence.

So why use Suboxone or Subutex? Because it's hard to do counseling with a monkey on your back. Cravings and withdrawals can occur repeatedly throughout the recovery process. Until you develop new, non-happy-pill coping mechanisms, any significant stressor or trigger has the potential to induce opioid cravings within you. And if you don't resolve those cravings quickly through relapse or resuming treatment, these cravings can produce severe physical withdrawals. Suboxone and Subutex will not cure you from opioid dependence. They are merely an oasis where cravings and withdrawals are kept at bay so that you can focus on your recovery process.

So how long will you need Suboxone or Subutex? I estimate that for every year you use recreational drugs, you will need two to three years of counseling, three to four times per week. So, a person who used opioids for five years will, in my opinion, likely need to go to counseling three to four times per week for between 10 and 15 years. Does this mean they'll need Suboxone or Subutex for 10 to 15 years? No. While there is no exact way to calculate how long any one individual will need these medications, most people who are actively engaged in counseling only need Suboxone or Subutex assistance during the first few months or years of their recovery, and then intermittently thereafter if and when they encounter an unexpected and overwhelming stressor or trigger.

So how do you use Suboxone or Subutex? Only when needed. These medications are only meant to relieve cravings and withdrawals. Keep in mind, that even people who don't have opioid dependence still have unpleasant days, and you must learn to distinguish between cravings and withdrawals and what is just a common, bad day. At first this may be difficult, but you can learn to distinguish the difference by doing the following:

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1. Do not take Suboxone or Subutex because “it’s time” - don’t take it by the clock.
2. Whenever you are considering taking a dose of Suboxone or Subutex, ask yourself the following question: Am I taking this for cravings or withdrawals?
 - If your honest answer is “yes,” then use the lowest dose possible (1 pill, ½ pill, 1/4 pill, etc.)
 - If your honest answer is “no,” then don’t use the medication. Instead find other ways to deal with your non-craving/non-withdrawal problems.
 - If your honest answer is “I’m not sure,” then wait a half-hour and ask yourself this question again. You can always take the medication later in the day if cravings or withdrawals occur.

So how do you wean off and stop Suboxone and Subutex? Don’t just suddenly stop. Instead, try either:

CALENDAR WEANING: reduce your medication dose by a 1/4 pill **per week** until you stop. For example, someone using 8 mg of sublingual buprenorphine per day would wean as follows:

Week 1	8 mg per day (one 8 mg pill spread out in divided doses)
Week 2	6 mg per day (3/4 of an 8mg pill spread out in divided doses)
Week 3	4 mg per day (½ of an 8 mg pill spread out in divided doses)
Week 4	2 mg per day (one 2 mg pill spread out in divided doses)
Week 5	1 mg per day (½ of a 2 mg pill per day)
Week 6	½ mg per day (1/4 of a 2 mg pill per day)

CRAVING WEANING: use the lowest dose of medication possible and wait as long in the day to take your first dose as possible. Initially you won’t notice any difference in your regimen, but in time you’ll start dosing later in the day and use less throughout the day. Then, usually unexpectedly, you’ll skip taking medication one day. A few days or weeks later you’ll skip another day. Soon after that you’ll skip two days in a row, and then three or more. This will grow into skipping medication for an entire week, and then an entire month. Ultimately, you’ll only use the medication sporadically throughout the remainder of your recovery.

How successful will my weaning be? Remember that the real problem is the mind. The success of your wean from Suboxone or Subutex will only be as great as the new coping skills you have developed. If you have used your time on these medications to aggressively apply yourself to the recovery process, you will likely have little if any withdrawal symptoms as you wean off Suboxone or Subutex. However, if you have made little progress in your recovery, then when you wean off of, or stop these medications, you will still be susceptible to stressors and triggers that produce cravings that will cause severe physical withdrawal symptoms and, possibly, relapse.

How do I know what my withdrawals are from? The withdrawal symptoms from Suboxone and Subutex can range from nothing to mild “flu-like” symptoms (a little headache, stomach upset, body aches, etc.). Mild is defined as “you could still go to work.” These symptoms usually only last about three to five days, so if you have these mild withdrawals during your weaning process, just bear with them and they will dissipate shortly. On the other hand, many people have severe, full-blown withdrawals when they stop or wean off of Suboxone or Subutex. If this occurs it is because you are still susceptible to significant stressors or triggers which cause opioid cravings which, when unsatisfied, cause these severe physical withdrawals. If this occurs, consider restarting Suboxone or Subutex at the lowest dose possible (as described above), and either start or resume your counseling efforts.