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New approach to managing post-surgery pain reduces opioid-based medication use by 50%

‘Enhanced surgical recovery’ approach lessens side effects, shortens hospital stays and reduces risk for misuse of pain meds

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Effective pain management is critical to surgical recovery; however, in the past decade this has often relied heavily on opioid-based medications that can cause side effects that slow down a patient’s physical recovery and put a patient at risk for pain medication dependency and addiction.

[The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute](#) (OSUCCC – James) and [The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center](#) have implemented a radically different approach to post-surgery pain management that is focused on maximizing non-opioid techniques first, using opioids only as a back-up option.

Anesthesiologist [Dr. Michelle Humeidan](#), who leads the initiative, says the data shows that non-opioid pain-management options can result in less pain, less nausea, shorter hospital stays and reduced costs.

The enhanced recovery pain management initiative was launched in 2015 as a pilot project in patients undergoing breast reconstruction surgery after cancer treatment. The initiative has since expanded into more than 10 additional surgical service lines throughout the OSUCCC – James and the Ohio State Wexner Medical Center.

Humeidan notes that hospital data shows a consistent 50% reduction in opioid pain medication use among hospitalized surgery patients since inception. This 50% reduction remains consistent in surgical recovery at home.

“This is remarkable because it shows we can achieve excellent pain control while being mindful about the opioids we use at the hospital. This means patients won’t return to the community with opioid-based medications that aren’t really needed that could then potentially add to the opioid abuse epidemic in this country, especially here in Ohio where this is a very significant problem,” Humeidan said.

Enhanced recovery process for pain management

This enhanced recovery approach is focused on building a pain management strategy before, during and after surgery to help patients recover faster.

The first step is gaining a detailed understanding of the patient’s medical history and past need for pain medications, as well as any history of addiction. This allows the clinical team to customize the pain management plan based on the patient’s individual medical history and risk

factors. This team-based approach to pain management starts well before surgery day and continues to provide support through the patient's recovery.

"We build a plan for each patient with this mindset upfront of opioids as a back-up only option – not the first, automatic option," Humeidan said.

This includes things like using acetaminophen before surgery and, in the operating room, using regional blocks or neuroaxial blocks – such as an epidural for pain control – and then using other non-opioid pain medicines. Proactive behavioral techniques, medical massage and relaxation techniques are also used to aid in recovery.

"After surgery, we are aggressively proactive to prevent pain and keep pain levels low. This is a complete change from the way things used to be, where we waited for patients to express their need for pain medication before giving it," Humeidan said. "With the enhanced approach to surgical recovery, we work ahead of the pain to keep it managed with non-opioid drugs."

Opioid-based medications, while highly effective, can slow down a patient's recovery process by delaying the body's systems from "waking up" post-surgery. Using non-opioid pain-management methods also can reduce patients' risk of nausea, difficulty breathing and gastrointestinal tract slowness.

"Just as importantly, as many as 1 in 5 patients can go on to need opioid-based pain medications long term. By changing the pain-management strategies we use during surgery, we can impact those numbers long term. This can help break the cycle of addiction, misuse and diversion in our community," Humeidan said.

Humeidan estimates that 12,000 patients have been treated with the enhanced surgical recovery approach to pain management since the initiative's inception. She hopes other hospital systems will consider adopting this shift in mindset toward pain management as a quality-improvement initiative.

To learn more about cancer treatment at the OSUCCC – James, visit cancer.osu.edu. To learn more about care at the Ohio State Wexner Medical Center, visit wexnermedical.osu.edu.