

# How to Get Off Prescription Drugs

Tips for stopping your meds safely, plus three success stories



By Teresa Carr and Ginger Skinner | Consumer Reports 2017

Whether you plan to stop taking a drug or just lower the dose, Consumer Reports' medical director, Orly Avitzur, M.D., advises that you talk with your doctor about how to wean yourself.

That's because abruptly quitting drugs can often trigger serious problems. For example, stopping many antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs, heartburn meds, and sleeping pills can worsen the symptoms the medication was meant to treat.

And if you've been taking opioids such as OxyContin, Percocet, or Vicodin for more than a couple of weeks, going cold turkey can trigger withdrawal symptoms including anxiety, muscle aches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and sleeplessness.

When making a plan to stop, here are some steps to take:

- Come up with a clear timeline for reducing your dose.

- Schedule follow-up appointments to monitor your progress.
- Ask about temporary effects you can expect that aren't cause for concern—and serious ones that you should be alert to and that warrant a call to your doctor.
- Discuss nondrug options you can try. For example, adding 30 minutes of physical activity daily may help control your blood pressure, or trying acupuncture, massage, spinal manipulation, cognitive behavior therapy, or yoga may help manage pain.

And don't become discouraged if you need to modify your plan, Avitzur says.

"There's no one-size-fits-all approach to stopping a drug," she explains. "You may need to slow your taper or even pause it for a while. It may take some trial and error to find what works best for you."

For examples of why you might want to cut back on your drugs—and how to do it—here are stories from three people who successfully reduced their need for prescription drugs.

## Case 1 – Glenn B. 32, Minnesota

**What he took:** The stimulants Ritalin, Adderall, and Vyvanse to treat ADHD, and then four antidepressants to treat the side effects of the stimulants.

**Why he wanted to stop:** Soon after Bitzan was diagnosed with ADHD at age 13, his psychiatrists prescribed progressively higher doses of a stimulant to treat the condition, he says. When that triggered sleeplessness, anxiety, a racing heart, and shaking hands, doctors prescribed a series of antidepressants to counter the stimulant. But instead of calming him, they "just dampened my emotions," Bitzan says. Then one day, while taking a test as an ultrasound technician student, Bitzan's shaky hands caused him to fail the exam. "I'd never been so devastated in my life," he says. "I knew I had to get off the medication."

**How he did it:** Bitzan entered a prescription-drug-withdrawal program called Point of Return, which took five months. Being medication-free has changed his life, he says. "My sleep is much improved; I have a stable job," he says. "I'm much happier."

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<— Back to Point of Return