ST. FRANCIS 24/7 CALL CENTER: (321) 269-4240

St. Francis REFLECTIONS℠ Lifestage Care
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Opioids

Pain management is a critical component of hospice care, but it's essential to monitor for potential side effects associated with pain medications. Opioids are powerful pain relievers but come with a range of potential side effects that require careful monitoring. Common opioids include morphine, oxycodone, hydrocodone, fentanyl, methadone and hydromorphone.

Common signs and symptoms to monitor for:

- **Constipation**: Opioids slow down the digestive system, leading to less frequent and harder stools.
    - **Monitor**: Infrequent bowel movements, straining, hard stools, and abdominal discomfort.
        - **Management**:
        - Proactively start a bowel regimen when beginning opioid therapy. This may include stool softeners and laxatives (like Senna or docusate).
        - Encourage fluid intake, a high-fiber diet, and physical activity as tolerated.
        - Monitor bowel movements regularly and adjust treatment as needed.
        - Notify hospice if patient has not had a bowel movement within 3 days.

- **Nausea** and **Vomiting**: Opioids can affect the medulla oblongata (area of the brain that controls vomiting) or slows down the gastrointestinal tract. Symptoms should subside after a few days, once the body adjusts to the medication.
    - **Monitor**: Persistent nausea, vomiting, and decreased appetite.
        - **Management**:
        - Administer anti-nausea medications like ondansetron or metoclopramide as prescribed.
        - Ensure the patient takes opioids with food if appropriate.

        - Monitor hydration status and encourage small, frequent meals, as tolerated.

- **Sedation** and **Drowsiness**: Opioids depress the central nervous system, leading to drowsiness or fatigue. Symptoms should subside after a few days, once the body adjusts to the medication.
    - **Monitor**: Excessive sleepiness, difficulty waking, or confusion.
        - **Management**:
        - Ensure the patient's safety by preventing falls and avoiding activities that require alertness, like driving.
        - Assess the need to adjust the opioid dose if sedation interferes with quality of life.

- **Respiratory Depression**: Opioids can slow breathing, particularly at higher doses or when combined with other sedatives. Symptoms should subside after a few days, once the body adjusts to the medication.
    - **Monitor**: Slow, shallow breathing, cyanosis (bluish discoloration of the skin), and confusion.
        - **Management**:
        - Monitor respiratory rate regularly, especially after initiating or increasing opioid doses.
        - Ensure the patient is in a position that promotes easy breathing by adjusting the head of the bed.

- **Itching**: Opioids can trigger histamine release, causing itching, particularly on the face and chest. Symptoms should subside after a few days, once the body adjusts to the medication.
    - **Monitor**: Persistent itching, scratching, and skin irritation.
        - **Management**:
        - Use antihistamines like diphenhydramine if itching is bothersome.
        - Consider switching to a different opioid if itching is severe and persistent.
        - Moisturize the skin to reduce irritation.

Tips:

- Observe response to medication frequently, noting any new or worsening side effects.

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- Work with hospice team to adjust dosages or switch medications as needed to balance pain relief with manageable side effects.
- Always administer medications as prescribed.
- Keep a pain journal to assess effectiveness of pain regimen and use of 'as needed medication'.

St. Francis Reflections is always available to assist with any questions or concerns 24/7

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