

Researchers developing mobile app for opioid detoxification

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Buprenorphine (Suboxone) can be a successful treatment for opioid addiction, but stopping has side effects. Researchers are designing a smartphone app to help manage withdrawal. Credit: KristinaJovanovic/iStock

In the midst of the opioid epidemic, an estimated 1.5 million Americans seek treatment annually in an effort to avoid the life-threatening effects of opioid use disorder and improve their quality of life.

At the same time, those who have had successful [treatment](#) for heroin or prescription opioid addiction eventually want to come off the medications they have been prescribed, such as buprenorphine (Suboxone). That challenge is complicated by a lack of available treatment resources to help them manage buprenorphine discontinuation effectively.

To ease the withdrawal experience, a research team led by Michael Stein, Boston University School of Public Health chair of health law, policy, and management, is developing a smartphone application to aid people managing the symptoms of opioid detoxification.

Stein, a physician and addiction expert, will work with colleagues from the Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) and Brown University to develop the app, using a two-year, \$414,000 grant recently awarded by the National Institutes of Health.

The app will offer patients who have been taking long-term buprenorphine or methadone and are approaching the time to stop those medications a variety of supports, education, and means for self-monitoring, including: a timeline marking specific withdrawal symptoms they can expect; a list of questions to ask clinicians; and audio/video elements that can be accessed on demand. The app also will have a tracking tool so that people can visualize their progress and receive feedback for reaching milestones.

The app, named "OFFBup," is being developed by a research team that includes co-principal investigators Ana Abrantes and Lisa Uebelacker, associate professors at the Alpert Medical School of Brown University and research psychologists at Butler Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island. Emmanuel Agu, associate professor of computer science at WPI, and Clifford Lindsay, assistant professor at UMass Medical School, are providing technical expertise.

The team hopes to develop the app in the first year of the grant by working with patients who are stopping buprenorphine, and then begin a pilot test with patients at Butler in the second year.

Stein says the OFFBup intervention will be "a resource that patients can access anytime and anywhere. Buprenorphine is an effective treatment, but at a certain point—either out of personal preference, because they no longer want to take a medication, or necessity, because they can't afford it—treatment comes to an end.

"Because we know there are significant side effects to stopping buprenorphine," he says, "we think

OFFBup will help people get through these and remain drug-free."

Provided by Boston University

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