For the Record

This embarrassing health problem affected Olympic athlete Jackie Joyner-Kersee and millions of other Americans prescribed opioid meds.

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When we watch athletes competing in the Olympic Games, we rarely see the years of dedicated training they endure. To prepare for this elite sports event, athletes must sometimes push their bodies past ordinary limits to achieve their athletic goals. Jackie Joyner-Kersee is one of these athletes. And as a six-time winner of Olympic gold, silver and bronze medals, she later faced pain from those years of training to compete in the long jump and heptathlon. What her training didn't prepare her for, however, were additional challenges from the uncomfortable side effects of her pain management treatment with opioid medications.

Opioid meds are derived from morphine, a narcotic used to treat moderate to severe pain. Doctors prescribed opioid medication for Joyner-Kersee as they do for millions of Americans who suffer from chronic pain. Like many other people using these prescription meds, Joyner-Kersee experienced one of its common side effects.

"While the opioids helped manage the pain, I noticed I became constipated frequently," she says. "It was taking such an emotional and physical toll that I finally had to work up the nerve to talk to my health care provider."

But first Joyner-Kersee had to leap over the hurdle of embarrassment so she could get deep into an uncomfortable conversation with her doctor about the problem. "Once I got past that hump, he realized that opioid-induced constipation, or OIC, was one of the side effects of the prescribed medication," she says.

As a way to prepare herself for the difficult conversation, Joyner-Kersee wrote her symptoms down in a journal. "I always wrote down everything I would do, so when I started reading it back, I began to realize that something wasn't right. This was a roundabout way, but it helped me discuss the problem."

After Joyner-Kersee realized that many other people who are undergoing opioid therapy also suffer from OIC, she wanted to help raise awareness about the issue. That's why she partnered with

AstraZeneca and Daiichi Sankyo, two pharmaceutical companies that launched a campaign to inform people about this common side effect.

Many people with OIC—which is different from normal constipation—are reluctant to discuss the symptoms with their doctors. Joyner-Kersee wants to change that. “I want to let people know there’s help out there and a place to go where they can educate themselves and learn about the common side effects of OIC that comes from using prescribed opioids,” she says.

The place Joyner-Kersee speaks of is ohisee.com. The website features a community of people who want to help others learn more about OIC by sharing their stories and tips about dealing with this problem.

According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, OIC is very manageable. This federal agency suggests that patients who suffer from OIC try stool softeners, emollient agents and stimulant laxatives to make bowel movements easier. But the first step in the plan entails a candid talk with their health care providers.

Says the woman Sports Illustrated called the Greatest Female Athlete of the 20th Century, “This website is a way to help someone who needs it to go and have a conversation with their doctor. It’s a very uncomfortable conversation to have, but we have to have that conversation.”

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