

Patient information

Use of opioids for pain

This booklet will help to explain the use of opioid medications in treating pain.

How do opioids work?

Opioids provide pain relief by acting on areas in the spinal cord and brain to block the transmission of pain signals. They are some of the strongest pain killers available and are used to treat pain after surgery, serious injury and cancer.

Opioid drugs may help manage some, but not all, types of chronic pain.

How are opioids taken?

Opioid medicines come in many different forms, such as injections, tablets, capsules, liquids, and patches.

For continuous long-term pain you may be given a slow release tablet or an opioid skin patch which gives a steady level of medicine in the blood. Your healthcare team will find the best way to manage your pain and adjust the dose to give you optimum pain relief and try to minimise the side effects. Fast acting opioid medicines and injected opioids are not very useful for managing continuous pain.

What dose of opioid should I take?

The correct dose of any medicine is the lowest dose that produces a noticeable benefit. It is unusual to get complete relief of pain from opioids.

You should always take the correct dose of prescribed medicines as directed. If you feel the dose is not enough, or if the side effects interfere with your life, discuss this with your healthcare team.

How long will it take to work?

Fast acting medications may be used when you first start trying opioid treatment; these may work within an hour and last for around three to four hours. Slow release tablets or patches take longer, up to two days, to begin to have any noticeable effect.

What are the possible side effects?

When you first start taking opioids you may get some short term side effects. These include:

- ◇ dizziness
- ◇ nausea
- ◇ vomiting
- ◇ feeling sleepy
- ◇ feeling confused

These side effects usually stop after a few days however some can go on for longer and your healthcare team may give you some other medicines to help, such as anti-sickness tablets.

If pain affects your sleep, opioids may help you to recover your normal pattern, but they should not make you drowsy in the daytime.

Opioid medicines can cause some problems when you take them for long periods of time. These problems include:

- ◇ constipation: this is a common problem when taking opioids and does not tend to go away the longer you take opioid medicines. You may need to try laxatives to treat constipation
- ◇ itching
- ◇ weight gain
- ◇ lack of sex drive
- ◇ difficulty breathing at night: this is most common if you are overweight and if you snore heavily. If you have obstructive sleep apnoea it may not be safe for you to take opioids.

If you experience a lot of side effects, your team may suggest changing your

medication.

What if I forget or miss a dose?

Take it as soon as you remember however if it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and take your medication as normal. **Do not** take two doses together.

Can I drive when I'm taking opioids?

The law on drugs and driving in the UK changed in 2015. **If your driving is impaired for any reason, including taking medicines, it is illegal to drive.** It is also illegal to drive when you are taking opioid medicines without them being prescribed, even if you are not impaired.

The law allows you to drive if you are taking prescribed opioid medicines in accordance with the instructions from your prescriber (including what your prescriber advises you about driving safely) if your driving is not impaired.

You should never drive if you feel unsafe.

Your ability to drive may be affected by other medicines you are taking in addition to opioids, whether you feel tired and by your pain. You are responsible for making sure you are safe on each occasion that you drive.

All opioid medicines have the potential to impair driving. If a person is taking more than 220mg of morphine a day, they are likely to have a blood level of the medicine which impairs them nearly as much as someone who is over the legal limit of alcohol.

It is unsafe to drive in the first few days after starting an opioid and for a few days after dose change (up or down). When taking opioids, avoid drinking alcohol before driving.

Can I take this medicine long term?

While opioids can have a positive benefit for some people living with long term pain, they can have serious consequences when they are not providing sufficient benefit or being taken in a manner that was not intended.

It is important to consider the risks and benefits of continued opioid therapy with your prescriber on a regular basis. Risks to your health increase significantly when prescribed opioids at high doses for a long period of time.

If you take opioid drugs for many months or years it can affect your body in a number of ways:

- ◇ reduced fertility
- ◇ low sex drive
- ◇ irregular periods
- ◇ erectile dysfunction in men
- ◇ reduced ability to fight infection
- ◇ increased levels of pain

If you are worried about any of these problems, please discuss this with your healthcare team.

Everyone prescribed opioid medicines should have them reviewed by their prescriber at regular intervals. If this does not happen, ask your GP.

If you want to try reducing your dose, you should discuss this with your healthcare team and bring the dose down slowly.

Many people find that after a few months they can reduce their opioid dose without the pain increasing. As fewer side effects are experienced, quality and enjoyment of life can improve. All of this contributes to greater physical fitness.

Can I drink alcohol?

Alcohol and opioids can both cause sleepiness and poor concentration. You should avoid alcohol completely when you first start on opioids or when your dose has just been increased. If you are taking opioids, you should avoid alcohol if you are going to drive or use tools or machines.

Will my body get used to opioid medicines?

Opioids can become less effective with time (this is called tolerance). This means that your body has got used to the pain-relieving effect of the medicine. You can also become dependent on opioid medicines (dependence). This means that, if you

stop taking the drug suddenly, or lower the dose too quickly, you can get symptoms of withdrawal. These include:

- ◇ tiredness
- ◇ sweating
- ◇ a runny nose
- ◇ stomach cramps
- ◇ diarrhoea
- ◇ aching muscles

What about addiction to opioids?

People who are addicted to opioids can:

- ◇ feel out of control about how much medicine they take or how often they take it
- ◇ crave the drug
- ◇ continue to take the drug even when it has a negative effect on their physical or mental health

Addiction to opioids for pain relief is more common if you have been previously addicted to opioids (including heroin) or to other drugs or alcohol. Addiction may be more common in people with severe depression or anxiety. This does not mean that if you have had an addiction problem before or you are very depressed and anxious you will become addicted. It only means that you are more likely to become addicted than someone who has not had these problems.

If you have had a problem with drug or alcohol addiction in the past this does not mean that you cannot take opioid medicines for your pain. However, your healthcare team will need to know about your past or current drug-taking to prescribe opioids safely and to help you watch out for warning signs.

What if I want to stop taking an opioid?

Do not stop taking your opioid suddenly, you may experience withdrawal symptoms. Speak to your healthcare professional (doctor, nurse, pharmacist) who will be able to supervise a gradual reduction.

Is there anything else my prescriber needs to know?

- ◇ If you are allergic to any drugs or medicines
- ◇ If you are taking any other medicines or herbal medicines
- ◇ If you are pregnant or breast feeding, or if you are planning to become pregnant in the future
- ◇ If you have a kidney problem
- ◇ If you have, or have had, a history of excessive alcohol use, recreational drug use or addiction to prescribed or over-the-counter medication

Important safety messages

- ◇ **Use the medicine as directed on the label**
- ◇ **Store all medicines safely:** Make sure they cannot be seen or reached by children or vulnerable adults. Please check the pharmacy label for storage instructions such as 'store in the fridge'
- ◇ **Never share your medicines:** Your medicines have been prescribed only for you to take – nobody else
- ◇ **Disposal of medicines no longer required:** Medicines no longer required must be disposed of safely. Safe disposal can be ensured by returning unwanted medicines to a pharmacy

Signs and symptoms of overdose

Taking too much opioid pain medicine whether intentional or not is called an overdose. This can be very serious and may cause death.

Some of the signs that someone is experiencing an overdose includes:

- Confusion or hallucinations
- Unresponsive or unconscious
- Difficulty breathing or no breathing
- Slurred speech
- Very small pupils in the eyes

- Lips or fingernails are blue or purple
- Poor coordination of balance

Your family, friends and carers should know these signs so they can take immediate action.

If you think that you or someone else has taken too much of their opioid medicine dial 999 immediately

References:

Opioids Aware 2016. Faculty of Pain Medicine

www.fpm.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware

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<https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust>



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