

Taking opioids for pain

Opioids provide pain relief by acting on areas in the spinal cord and brain to block the transmission of pain signals. Opioids are considered to be some of the strongest medicines for pain and are used short-term to treat pain after surgery and serious injury. Opioid medicines can also help manage some types of long-term pain, such as pain due to cancer, but not all chronic pain responds to opioids. Some examples of opioid medicines are codeine, morphine, oxycodone, tramadol, buprenorphine and fentanyl.

What dose of opioid should I take?

The correct dose of any medicine is the lowest dose that produces a noticeable benefit. It is not usual to get complete relief of pain from opioids. You should always take the correct dose of prescribed medicines. If you feel the dose is not enough, or if the side effects interfere with your life, you should discuss this with your healthcare team (GP, pharmacist or nurse).

Paracetamol is recommended to be taken alongside to minimise opioid requirements and help with pain relief.

How long will it take to work?

Opioid medication can be prescribed in the form of tablets, capsules, liquid or skin patches. Some forms taken by mouth may work within an hour and last for around 3 to 4 hours. These are known as immediate release formulations. Slow-release forms come as oral tablets, capsules or skin patches and can take up to 2 days to begin to have a noticeable effect. Speak with your healthcare team if there is no noticeable effect on pain within a few days.

What are the possible side effects?

When you first start taking opioids you may get some side effects, which usually stop after a few days. These include:

- feeling dizzy
- feeling sick (nausea)
- being sick (vomiting)
- feeling sleepy
- feeling confused

Sometimes these side effects can go on for longer than a few days. Your healthcare team may give you some other medicines to help, such as anti-sickness tablets.

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

- constipation*
- itching
- weight gain
- lack of sex drive
- difficulty breathing – seek medical advice immediately Δ

* 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. If you experience a lot of side effects your team may suggest changing to another opioid drug.

Δ Difficulty in breathing at night is most common if you are overweight and if you snore heavily. If you have a condition called obstructive sleep apnoea it may not be safe for you to take opioids.

Can I drive when I'm taking opioids?

The law on drugs and driving in the UK states that if your driving is impaired for any reason, including taking medicines, it is illegal to drive or attempt to drive. Your ability to drive may be affected by opioids, other medicines you may be taking in addition to opioids, whether you feel tired, and by your pain. You should never drive if you feel unsafe. You are responsible for making sure you are safe on each occasion that you drive. If in doubt, **do not** drive.

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 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 are being taken in a manner that was not intended. It is important to consider the risks and benefits of continued opioid therapy with your healthcare team on a regular basis. The risks to your health increase significantly when prescribing 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. These problems include:

- reduced fertility
- low sex drive
- irregular periods
- erectile dysfunction in men (the inability to keep an erection)
- reduced ability to fight infection
- increasing levels of pain

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

Everyone prescribed opioid medicines in the long-term should have a regular review, every 3-6 months, with their healthcare team. If this does not happen make an appointment to see your General Practitioner (GP).

If you want to try reducing your dose, you should discuss this with your doctor and bring the dose down slowly. Many individuals are able to reduce their opioid dose gradually and find that their

pain is no worse. As fewer side effects are experienced, quality and enjoyment of life can improve. All of this contributes to greater physical fitness. Rapid reduction or suddenly stopping opioids can cause withdrawal symptoms.

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) meaning 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. If you run out of medicine, you can experience the same symptoms that include:

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

What about addiction to opioids?

Addiction to opioids is more common if you have been addicted to opioids (including heroin), other drugs or alcohol before, or in people with severe depression or anxiety. This does not mean that if you have had an addiction problem before or if 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. Most people do not become addicted.

If you have had a problem with drug or alcohol addiction in the past, inform your healthcare team who will help you watch out for warning signs. For example, if you are showing signs of the following:

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

What if I want to stop taking an opioid?

If you have been taking opioids for chronic pain or are on long-term opioids (more than 3 months), do not stop taking your opioid suddenly as you may experience withdrawal symptoms. Speak to your healthcare professional who will be able to supervise a gradual reduction.

If you are taking opioids for short-term pain relief after a procedure or injury, it is safe and advisable to stop your opioid treatment once pain can be managed with simple analgesics on their own, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen.

Further information

If you have any queries or require further information about your opioid medicine, please contact

- a member of your healthcare team, or
- call the Medicines Information Patient Helpline on 01438 286150
 - Available Monday to Friday 10am-12noon and 2pm-4pm (excluding bank holidays)
- Faculty of Pain Medicine website - www.fpm.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware

Useful contact details

East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust:

- Website www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk
- Telephone 01438 314333

Leaflet information

Acknowledgement: Adapted from Opioids Aware 2016. Faculty of Pain Medicine www.fpm.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware

You can request this information in a different format or another language; please speak to your doctor or nurse.

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