

Opioid factsheet

This factsheet provides you with information about medicines called opioids to help improve safety by raising awareness of the risks as well as benefits.

What are opioids?

Opioids are a group of medicines used to treat moderate to severe pain and they provide pain relief by acting on areas in the spinal cord and brain to block the transmission of pain signals. Opioids are very good for acute short-term pain, for example pain after surgery, a heart attack or serious injury. They are also often used for treating cancer pain and pain at the end of life.

However, opioids are not generally recommended for long-term use as there is little evidence that they are helpful, particularly when taken at higher doses for long-term pain; for example taking them for longer than three months for lower back pain, pain related to arthritis, and pain related to the nervous system.

Examples of opioids are codeine, dihydrocodeine, tramadol, morphine, buprenorphine, fentanyl, hydromorphone, methadone and oxycodone.

There is no standard dose of an opioid as an effective dose varies from person to person. Your healthcare team will find the best way to manage your pain and, if an opioid is required, will prescribe the lowest effective dose in order to minimise the side effects. However, it is unusual to obtain complete relief of pain from an opioid.

Common side effects of opioids

When you first start taking an opioid you can 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 continue for more than a few days. Your healthcare team may give you some other medicines to help, such as anti-sickness tablets.

An opioid medicine can cause some problems when you take it for a long period of time. These problems include:

- Constipation: this is a common problem when taking an opioid and tends not to go away the longer you take the opioid. You may need to try a laxative 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 a condition called obstructive sleep apnoea it may be unsafe for you to take opioids.

If you experience several side effects, your team may suggest changing to another opioid.

Risks and benefits of opioids

While opioids may be effective over short periods to relieve moderate to severe pain, long term use can lead to serious health consequences.

It is important to consider the risks and benefits of continued opioid therapy with your prescriber on a regular basis. Recent medical literature suggests that the risks to health increase significantly when opioids are prescribed and taken at high doses for a long period. Opioids can often cause more problems than they resolve when taken for more than three months because the way our bodies react to pain medication changes over time. Regular, high-dose prescribed opioid medication may adversely affect your life more than the pain itself. These problems include:

- Reduced fertility
- Low sex drive
- Irregular periods
- Erectile dysfunction (inability to keep an erection) in men
- Reduced ability to fight infection
- Increased levels of pain – known as opioid induced hyperalgesia
- Increased risk of falls and fractures
- Depression and fatigue.

Please discuss these with your healthcare team. They will be able to tell you whether you are at risk of developing these problems.

Everyone prescribed opioid medicines in the long-term should have them reviewed by their prescriber at regular intervals. If this does not happen, discuss with your pharmacist, nurse, or doctor.

Addiction

Addiction after long term use can happen gradually and can make you feel that you are no longer in control of how much medicine you need to take or how often you need to take it. You might feel that you need to carry on taking your medicine, even when it doesn't help to relieve your pain.

If your pain is becoming difficult to manage, talk to your doctor. Your body may have stopped sensing the pain-relieving effect of your opioid and this is called 'opioid tolerance'. It could be an early warning sign that you are at risk of becoming addicted. Signs that you may be addicted to opioids include:

- Craving for the medicine
- Feeling that you need to take more medicine than prescribed or as instructed on the pack, even though the medicine is causing unwanted effects on your overall health
- Feeling that you need to take additional medicines containing opioids or other pain relief medicines to achieve the same pain relief
- Taking opioid medicines for reasons other than for pain relief: such as, to 'stay calm' or 'help you to sleep'
- Experiencing withdrawal side effects when you stop taking the medicine suddenly (see page 4).

If you notice any of the above, it is important to talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

Effects of taking too much opioid medicine

Taking too much opioid medicine is called an overdose, whether it's intentional or not. This can be very serious and may cause death. Some of the signs of an overdose include:

- Confusion or hallucinations
- Slurred speech
- Lips or fingernails appearing blue or purple
- Poor coordination or balance
- Lack of response or unconsciousness
- Heavy or unusual snoring
- Difficulty in breathing, or not breathing
- Very small pupils in the eyes.

Your family, friends, and carers should be aware of these signs so they can take immediate action if they see you experience any of them as they can be life-threatening.

If you think that you or someone else has taken too much of their opioid medicine, then immediately call for an ambulance by phoning 999 immediately.

How can I stop taking opioids?

You may decide that you would like to stop or reduce taking an opioid. Do not stop taking your opioid suddenly; you may experience withdrawal symptoms. Speak to your healthcare professional (doctor, nurse, or pharmacist) who will be able to advise about taking a gradual reduction of your medication.

Many individuals can gradually reduce their opioid dose and find that their pain is no worse. As fewer side effects are experienced, quality and enjoyment of life can improve so that people are able to undertake regular activity and exercise. All of this contributes to greater physical fitness and wellbeing.

Withdrawal effects

It is important to get the right help and support when you are ready to stop taking your medicine. Safely coming off opioids can take a long time. Every person is different. Withdrawal side effects may include a combination of the following:

- Shivering
- Diarrhoea
- Difficulty sleeping
- Sweating
- Widespread or increased pain
- Body aches
- Irritability and agitation
- Nausea and vomiting

Take any unused opioids back to a pharmacy for safe disposal.

If you experience any of these, talk to the person who prescribed your medicine or a pharmacist.

Does alcohol affect my opioid?

Both alcohol and opioids both can cause sleepiness and poor concentration. You should avoid alcohol completely when you first start taking opioids or when your dose has just been increased. If you are taking opioids, it is best to avoid alcohol and you should avoid alcohol if you are going to drive or use tools or machines. Once you are on a steady dose of opioid, you may be able to drink small amounts of alcohol without experiencing any extra unwanted effects.

Can I drive when taking opioids?

It is unsafe to drive in the first few days after starting an opioid and for a few days after a change in dose (up or down).

You should never drive if you feel unsafe. Your ability to drive safely may be affected by opioids as well as by other medicines or symptoms such as, tiredness or pain. You yourself are legally responsible for making sure you are safe on each occasion that you drive.

It is illegal to drive if your driving is impaired for any reason, including taking medicines. It is also illegal to drive when you have more than specified limits of certain drugs like opioids in your blood, and you have not been prescribed them, even if you are not impaired.

Can opioids be taken during pregnancy?

Do not take opioid medicines without health professional advice if you are pregnant. Babies born to women who take opioids during pregnancy may need to be carefully monitored for withdrawal effects after birth. Talk to your doctor or midwife if you are worried.

Where can I find more information and support?

You can speak to your local pharmacist, GP, or the person who prescribed the medication to you.

- The Faculty of Pain Medicine website: Opioids Aware. <https://fpm.ac.uk/opioids-aware/information-patients>
- The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence have information for the public about chronic pain. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng193/informationforpublic>
- The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence have information for the public about safe opioid prescribing and withdrawal management for adults. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng215/informationforpublic>
- The NHS website has specific opioid medicines information. <https://www.nhs.uk/>