

# Taking opioids for pain

Pain relief medicine is used to reduce how strong your pain is, alongside helping you to self-manage your pain better and set realistic goals.

Opioid medications include buprenorphine, codeine, co-codamol, dihydrocodeine, fentanyl, morphine, oxycodone, tapendadol and tramadol. Opioids are good for short-term pain, such as after an injury or surgery. However, only about 1 in 10 people will find that taking opioids for longer periods helps with their pain. We cannot know who will benefit from taking opioids until they have tried them. If the medicine is not helping with your pain OR if it is causing side-effects, the dose should be carefully reduced at a time and pace suited to you, and then stopped altogether.

## How do opioids work?

Opioids target areas in the spinal cord and brain to block pain signals. They are some of the strongest painkillers available, and are used to treat pain after surgery, serious injury or cancer.

We used to think that opioids helped with longer-lasting pain, but we now know that they don't. More importantly, we now know that opioids are not safe to take for longer periods as they can cause side-effects, addiction and long-term harm.

## What dose of opioid should I take?

The correct dose of any medicine is the lowest dose that has a benefit. Opioids do not usually provide complete pain relief, so never take more than you have been prescribed. If you feel the dose is not enough, or if you have side-effects, please discuss this with your healthcare professional.

## How long will it take to work?

This will depend on the opioid prescribed. A fast-acting tablet, capsule or liquid will usually work within one hour and last for around four hours. Slow-release tablets, capsules or patches may not have any noticeable effect for two or more days.

## What are the possible side-effects?

These side-effects are usually short-term, but if they last more than a few days, please speak to your healthcare professional.

- Feeling dizzy
- Feeling sick
- Being sick
- Feeling confused and sleepy

If you take opioid medication for longer periods, they can cause problems, including:

- Constipation (finding it hard to poo)
- Itching
- Weight gain
- Lack of sex drive
- Sleep problems
- Difficulty breathing at night (most common if you are overweight and if you snore heavily)
- Possible addiction

## Can I take this medicine long-term?

Opioids can have a positive benefit for a few people living with long-term pain, but they can cause serious harm when they are not helping with your pain or are not being taken as prescribed. It is important to regularly review the risks and benefits of continuing to use opioids with your prescriber. Long-term problems include:

- Risk of falls and fractures

- Reduced fertility (ability to have children)
- Low sex drive
- Erectile dysfunction (ability to have sex)
- Increased levels of pain
- Less able to fight infection
- Possible addiction

If you are worried about any of these problems, please discuss them with your healthcare professional. If you are taking opioid medication for longer periods but not having regular reviews with your prescriber, speak to your GP practice.

If you want to try reducing your dose, you should discuss this with your healthcare professional to make sure this is done slowly and safely. Many people find that their pain is no worse as the dose is reduced. With fewer side-effects, you may find your quality and enjoyment of life improve.

### **Will my body get used to opioid medication?**

For most people, opioids become less effective with time. This is because your body gets used to the pain-relieving effect of the medicine (**tolerance**). You can also get symptoms of withdrawal if you stop taking the drug suddenly or lower the dose too quickly (**dependence**).

If you run out of your medicines, you can also experience these symptoms:

- Tiredness
- Sweating
- A runny nose
- Stomach cramps
- Diarrhoea (passing looser, watery, or more frequent poo than normal)
- Aching muscles

### **What about addiction to opioids?**

Occasionally, people can become addicted to opioids, which may mean that they:

- Feel out of control about how much medicine they take or how often they take it
- Crave the medication (strongly feel that they want it)
- Keep taking the medication even if it is harming their physical or mental health

### **What can I do if I want to stop taking an opioid?**

It is important not to stop taking your opioid suddenly, as you may have withdrawal symptoms. Your healthcare professional will be able to help you to reduce your dose slowly and safely.

### **Can I drink alcohol when I am taking opioids?**

Both alcohol and opioids can make you feel sleepy and make it hard for you to concentrate. When you first start taking opioids or when your dose has just been increased, you should avoid alcohol completely. Once you are taking a steady dose, it should be safe for you to drink modest amounts of alcohol. Drinking alcohol reduces the amount of opioid medicine you can take and drive safely, so never drive if you have drunk alcohol and taken opioid medication.

### **Can I drive when I am taking opioids?**

Your ability to drive may be affected by opioids, or other medication you may be taking. It is illegal to drive if your driving is impaired for any reason, including taking medicines. It is also illegal to drive when you are taking opioid medication that hasn't been prescribed, even if your driving isn't impaired.

Never drive if you feel unsafe. It is unsafe to drive for the first few days after you start taking opioids, and for a few days after your dose has changed. Drinking alcohol reduces the amount of opioid medicine you can take and drive safely, so never drive if you have drunk alcohol and taken opioid medication.

**Disclaimer:** this resource has not been through the full governance approval process and is designed as an information resource for you to use to support decision making