

Frequently asked questions about opioids

Palliative Care Team Patient Information Leaflet

Introduction

This leaflet is for people who are taking a medication called opioids. It gives information on what opioids are, how to take them and what the side effects are. Please also refer to the manufacturer patient information leaflet provided in the medicine boxes for more information.

What are opioids?

Opioid medicines are drugs used for moderate to severe pain. They are sometimes also used to relieve breathlessness or a cough.

Common examples of strong opioids are:

- Morphine
- Diamorphine
- Oxycodone
- Fentanyl
- Buprenorphine

These opioids come as different brands and not all brands are the same. Therefore, once you have started on a brand, it is recommended that you stick to that brand. If you notice that the opioid medicine you have been given looks different in any way to those you have previously received, please discuss this with your pharmacist.

Aren't opioids only used for people who are at the end of their life?

No. Opioids are given for different sorts of moderate to severe pain that may be as a result of cancer, heart disease or other illnesses.

How do I take/apply opioids?

Opioids can be given in several ways.

- You will usually be prescribed an opioid that you need to take regularly. How often you need to take this will differ depending on what type of opioid has been prescribed for you. For example, modified-release tablets or capsules may be taken every twelve hours. They are used to treat the pain that you have all the time which is called **background pain**.

Name of medication: _____

When to take/apply it: _____

However, you may experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due. The cause of this pain and how long it lasts will differ from person to person. Therefore, you will also be prescribed a faster acting medicine for these episodes of pain. This is for when your pain suddenly gets worse and you need something extra.

Name of medication: _____

When to take/apply it: _____

If you experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due, you should take an additional dose of the quick-acting opioid that has been prescribed for you. If you find you have to take a lot of additional doses, let your GP, hospital doctor, nurse or Pharmacist know.

If I take opioids, will I get addicted to them and be unable to stop taking them?

No. Taking opioids for pain will not make you an addict. It is quite normal for the dose to increase over time, although many people remain on the same dose for long periods.

As with other medicines, you should not stop taking opioids suddenly without discussing this with your GP, hospital doctor or nurse as your body needs time to adjust. If you no longer need to take opioids, your doctor or nurse will gradually reduce the dose that they prescribe for you.

How will I know if the opioids are not going to work for my pain?

You may still have pain despite taking bigger doses of opioid medications and may feel unwell in one or more of these ways:

- More sleepy
- Feeling sick more of the time
- Restlessness and jumpiness
- Bad dreams

If this happens, tell your GP or hospital doctor or nurse. It may mean that the opioids are not working for you. The doctor may reduce your dose of opioids and suggest other treatments to help your pain.

What are the main side effects to look out for?

Opioids tend to make you constipated and most people will need to take laxatives to help empty their bowels. Morphine can sometimes make you feel sick when you first take it. This usually only lasts a few days but your doctor may give you something to stop this feeling.

Opioids can make you feel sleepy for the first few days while you are getting used to them, or when the dose is increased, but our bodies can usually adapt gradually.

Can I drive if I am taking opioids?

Driving may be possible but there are many factors to consider and your doctor or nurse will advise you. As in any other situation, please remember you should only drive if you feel it is completely safe to do so.

Can I drink alcohol if I am taking opioids?

Yes. You can drink small amounts (for example, a small glass of wine, beer or spirits) but it may make you feel more sleepy.

Is there a maximum dose of opioids?

No. There is no maximum dose. If it is taken for pain as prescribed, the dose can be increased gradually to match your pain.

Often people can be on very large doses of opioids for a long time without significant problems.

If I take opioids for pain, why do I need other painkillers?

Although opioids are very good painkillers, they are not helpful for all types of pain. Other treatments may be needed and suggested by your doctor or nurse.

How do I store my opioids at home?

Keep the medicines in their original containers, clearly labelled and stored safely at room temperature in a dry place. Make sure that they are well out of reach and sight of children.

The label should provide storage instructions but check with your pharmacist if you are unsure.

What should I do with any opioids that I no longer need?

Return any opioids you do not need to the pharmacist for safe disposal. Do not flush them down the toilet or throw them away. Remove and fold old patches – Always remove and dispose of old patches before adding a new one. Fold the patch in half as soon it is removed so that the sticky side sticks firmly to itself and put back in the original sachet.

Further prescribing and follow up

Your GP or hospital doctor will provide you with further prescriptions for your opioid medication. It is very important that you never run out of your medication.

You should not stop taking these drugs unless on the advice of a doctor or nurse as this would be likely to make you feel ill for a few days afterwards. This is called a withdrawal reaction.

If you need advice or have problems out of normal hours, contact your out-of-hours GP service, district nurse or call NHS 111.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please speak to your GP or pharmacist.

This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:

<http://dgft.nhs.uk/services-and-wards/end-of-life-care/patient-information-leaflets/>

If you have any feedback on this patient information leaflet, please email dgft.patient.information@nhs.net

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.

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此宣传单可提供大字版本、音频版本和其它语言版本，请拨打电话：0800 073 0510。

Ulotka dostępna jest również w dużym druku, wersji audio lub w innym języku. W tym celu zadzwoń pod numer 0800 073 0510.

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Aceasta broșura poate fi pusă la dispoziție tipărită cu caractere mari, versiune audio sau în alte limbi, pentru acest lucru va rugăm sunați la 0800 073 0510.

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