

Patient Information

Taking Opioids for Pain

Acute Pain Team

Pain is different for everyone - some patients will need more pain killer and some will need less.

This leaflet has been made using information from the **Royal College of Anaesthetists** information booklets, which were written by patients, patient representatives and anaesthetists, working together.

This leaflet gives you information about taking opioids (strong) painkillers for pain

This information is intended as a general guide only. Please ask your doctor or nurse if you have any questions about the information below.

Prescription opioids can be used to help relieve moderate to severe pain and are often prescribed following a surgery or injury, or for certain health conditions. These medications can be an important part of treatment but also come with serious risks.

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. Opioids are considered to be some of the strongest painkillers available and are used to treat pain after surgery, serious injury and cancer. Opioid drugs can 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.

What dose of opioid should I take?

You should always take the correct dose of prescribed medicines. If you feel the dose isn't enough, or if the side effects interfere with your life, you should discuss this with your GP.

Never take opioids in greater amounts or more often than prescribed.

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.**

What are the possible side effects?

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

1. feeling dizzy
2. feeling sick (nausea)
3. being sick (vomiting)
4. feeling sleepy
5. feeling confused
6. constipation
7. itching

Can I drink alcohol?

Alcohol and opioids both can 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?

YES - opioids can become less effective with time (this is called tolerance) meaning your body will need more medication for the same pain relief. You can also become dependent on opioid medicines (dependence). Or your body can become more sensitive to pain.

What about addiction to opioids?

It is rare for people in pain to become addicted 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.

Most people do not become addicted. So, if you have had a problem with drug or alcohol addiction in the past this doesn't mean that you cannot take opioid medicines for your pain. However, your health-care 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 or pharmacist) who will be able to supervise a gradual reduction.

Can I drive when I'm taking opioids?

The law in the UK allows you to drive if you are taking prescribed opioid medicines in the correct dose prescribed for you. You are **responsible** for making sure you are **safe** to drive.

All opioid medicines have the potential to impair driving and your prescriber will advise whether the dose of opioid you are taking is likely to impair you. If you are taking a high dose of opioid your prescriber will advise you that you are probably not safe to drive and will document this in your medical notes.

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).

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 prescriber on a regular basis. Recent medical literature suggests that the risks to your health increase significantly when prescribing opioids at high doses for a long period of time.

Everyone prescribed opioid medicines in the long-term should have them reviewed by their GP at regular intervals.

Further information is available from;

Acute Pain Specialist Nurse – sath.pain.nurses@nhs.net

Opioid Calculator - <http://www.opioidcalculator.com.au/>

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

Patient Advise and Liaison Service (PALS)

We act on your behalf when handling patient and family concerns, liaising with staff, managers and where appropriate, relevant organisations to negotiate immediate or prompt solutions. We can also help you get support from other local or national agencies.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Tel: 0800 783 0057 or 01743 261691
Princess Royal Hospital, Tel: 01952 282888

Other Sources of Information

NHS 111

A fast and easy way to get the right help, whatever the time. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

Telephone: 111 (free from a landline or mobile)

Website: www.nhs.uk

Patient UK

Provides leaflets on health and disease translated into 11 other languages as well as links to national support/self-help groups and a directory of UK health websites.

Website: www.patient.info

Website: www.sath.nhs.uk

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