

Opioid medication

Information for patients

What is an opioid?

Opioids are a group of medicines derived from morphine to treat moderate to severe pain. They are effective over short periods of time, for example, to facilitate recovery after surgery and should be used at the lowest dose for the shortest time possible. In some circumstances, for example, in certain cancers or life limiting conditions, opioid medication may be prescribed for pain control over longer periods. The correct dose of any medicine is the lowest dose that produces a noticeable benefit. It is important to balance the benefits of opioids with potential side effects.

Opioids can be taken alongside other pain killers, for example, paracetamol or anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen or naproxen.

You may have also been prescribed a medication for nerve pain such as pregabalin or gabapentin. You should discuss whether these drugs can be reduced and discontinued with your doctor.

What are the different types of opioid medication?

Immediate release opioids taken by mouth

- Examples include morphine sulphate solution (Oramorph®), Oxycodone liquid (OxyNorm®), tramadol, codeine, buprenorphine and dihydrocodeine
- Start working within around 30 minutes
- Should be taken based on pain symptoms

Modified release opioids taken by mouth

- Examples include morphine sulphate (MST®, Zomorph®) and oxycodone (Oxycontin®, Longtec®)
- Release the medication slowly, delivering the dose over 12 hours so only need to be taken twice a day

Transdermal patches applied to the skin

- Examples include buprenorphine (BuTrans®) and fentanyl (Durogesic®)
- Release the medication slowly through the skin, delivering a sustained dose over a number of days

How should I take my opioid medication?

Opioids can be used for a short time after surgery or trauma (acute pain). The opioid medication will be reduced and stopped as the pain reduces with healing. This will normally be a short acting opioid.

For long term pain (non-cancer pain) opioids, are less effective and your pain maybe managed with other medications and self-management techniques, such as pacing or staying active. Our aim is to help you manage your pain and lead a fuller life.

Opioids can also be used effectively for cancer pain. With cancer pain if the pain is always present this is known as background pain. To control background pain, it is important you take a modified release opioid regularly at the same time each day.

Episodes of more severe pain, in addition to the background pain, is known as breakthrough pain. You will be prescribed a short-acting (immediate release) opioid to take should these episodes occur. The effect of the short-acting opioid will last approximately 4 hours.

- Always take medication as they have been prescribed by your healthcare professional.
- Avoid taking other medications, including additional pain relief which make you drowsy unless advised by a healthcare professional.
- Always read the label directions on your medication and do not take larger doses or take more frequently than stated unless advised by your prescriber.
- Always use an oral syringe or measuring spoon to measure liquid medication, do not guess the amount.
- Do not use opioid medication to help you sleep or manage anxiety.

What if my opioid medication was started in hospital, or after an operation or injury?

In the weeks after discharge from hospital you can start to reduce the amount of opioid analgesia as your pain or discomfort gets less.

Reduce the strong opioid medication first. You should be able to do this within 5 to 7 days of discharge from hospital. Paracetamol can usually be taken alongside opioid medications and can be stopped last.

If you were taking opioid medication prior to admission, seek advice from a healthcare professional about reducing medication.

What are the side effects opioid medication?

Like all medication, opioids can have side effects, these can include:

- Sickness (nausea), taking your medicine with or just after food may help to prevent this but this is generally transient. Anti-sickness medication may be prescribed for a short period if needed.
- Constipation, make sure you are drinking plenty of water and try to include more high fibre food in your diet unless otherwise advised. It is likely you will need to take a laxative alongside your opioid medication.
- Feeling sleepy or dizzy is common. If affected, do not attempt to complete complex tasks, such as operating machinery or even boiling a kettle. Do NOT drive.

- If you experience extreme drowsiness or are unable to stay awake, do NOT take any more opioid medication. Contact your GP, NHS 111 or your community palliative care team for advice.

Please consult the patient information leaflet that came with your medication for a full list of potential side effects, including long term effects.

What happens if I take too much?

Taking too much opioid medication, whether this was intentional or not, can lead to serious harm.

Signs of an opioid overdose include:

- Confusion or hallucinations
- Slurred speech
- Blue/purple lips or fingernails
- Poor coordination or balance
- Unresponsiveness or unconsciousness
- Heavy or unusual snoring
- Difficulty breathing
- Very small pupils in the eyes

If you or someone else has taken too much of their opioid medication or experiences any of these effects, contact your GP or community palliative care team. If very unwell dial 999 immediately.

Are opioid medications addictive?

Opioid medications do have a risk of addiction, although this is thought to be rare when they are taken to control pain.

Addiction can happen gradually but one of the first warning signs that you are at risk could be that the medication is no longer effectively managing your pain, this is known as opioid tolerance. If you experience this you should speak to your healthcare professional.

Other signs that you may be developing an addiction or dependence to opioid medication are:

- Craving the medication.
- Feeling that you need more medication than is prescribed.
- Feeling that you need additional medications to achieve the same relief.
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking it suddenly, for example, shivering, sweating, body aches, diarrhoea, irritability/agitation, sleep disturbance or nausea and vomiting.

Always speak to your healthcare professional if your medication is no longer effectively managing your pain or if you are experiencing any signs of addiction or withdrawal. They can advise how to safely reduce, stop or change your medication.

Can I drink alcohol whilst taking opioid medication?

Avoid altogether when you first start on opioids or if your dose has been increased. When you are on a steady dose of opioid, you should be able to drink modest amount of alcohol without unusual side effects.

Can I drive while taking opioid medication?

Opioid medication can affect your ability to drive and you should not drive if you feel sleepy or drowsy.

It is illegal to drive with legal medications in your body if it impairs your ability to drive safely.

It is your responsibility to make sure you are safe to drive. If you are unsure, speak to your GP.

For further information visit: www.gov.uk/drug-driving-law

How should I store and dispose of my medication?

Always keep all medication out of sight and reach of children.

Any unused medication should be returned to your pharmacy for safe disposal.

Never allow others to take medication given to you.

Useful resources

Live Well with Pain (livewellwithpain.co.uk) offers a number of resources to help manage pain

For driving advice: www.gov.uk/drug-driving-law

Further information and advice can be obtained from:

NHS 111
NHS Choices online

 **111**
www.nhs.uk

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Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust welcomes all forms of feedback from our service users. If the standard of service you have received from the Trust does not meet your expectations, we want to hear from you. Please speak with the ward manager or the nurse in charge in the first instance, or you can contact the **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** on:

Telephone:  01622 224960 or  01892 632953

Email: mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net

or visit their office at either Maidstone or Tunbridge Wells Hospital between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

You can be confident that your care will not be affected by highlighting any areas of concern or making a complaint. The Trust will retain a record of your contact, which is held separately to any medical records. If you are acting on behalf of a patient, we may need to obtain the patient's consent in order to protect patient confidentiality. More information on PALS or making a complaint can be found on the Trust's website: www.mtw.nhs.uk or pick up a leaflet from main reception.

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