



## **Opioid factsheet**

**This factsheet gives you information about opioids**

### **What are opioids?**

Opioids are a group of medicines used to treat pain. An opioid is either a natural derivative of opium (for example, morphine) or a synthetic substance (for example, methadone, or buprenorphine).

Opioids provide pain relief by acting on areas in the spinal cord and brain to block the transmission of pain signals. They are considered to be some of the strongest pain relievers 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.

Opioids are grouped according to whether they treat mild-moderate or moderate-severe pain. Weak opioids can be used in the treatment of mild-moderate pain if paracetamol and/or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug ((NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen or naproxen) have not worked.

Examples of weak opioids include codeine, dihydrocodeine and tramadol. Codeine in low doses combined with paracetamol (called co-codamol) and dihydrocodeine in low doses combined with paracetamol (co-dydramol) are available to buy from community pharmacies.

Stronger opioids are used to relieve moderate to severe pain when weaker pain medicines, such as paracetamol, NSAIDs or codeine, have not worked. They are used short term for pain after surgery, a heart attack or trauma, the dose is reduced as the pain eases.

Examples of strong opioids include morphine, buprenorphine, fentanyl, hydromorphone, methadone or oxycodone.

### **How to take opioids**

Opioids are very good for acute pain which is short-term and usually related to an obvious injury such as dental infection, bone fracture or operation and for pain at the end of life.

However, there is little evidence that they are helpful for long-term chronic non-cancer pain, for example, lower back pain, pain related to arthritis and pain related to the nervous system.

Opioid medicines come in many different forms, such as injections, tablets, capsules, liquids, and patches. Some forms are fast acting, for example, tablets that may work within an hour and the effect lasts for around three to four hours. Slow-release tablets or patches take longer, up to two days to begin to have any noticeable effect.

There is no standard dose of an opioid as this can vary from person to person. Opioids are usually started at a low dose and gradually increased up to the correct dose. The correct dose of any medicine is the lowest dose that produces a noticeable benefit. Your healthcare team will find the best way to manage your pain and adjust the opioid dose to give you pain relief most of the time, but also try to minimise the side effects. However, it is unusual to get complete relief of pain from opioids.

If you forget to take a dose of your opioid 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!**

## **Can opioids be taken during pregnancy?**

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

## **Does alcohol affect my opioid?**

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. When you get on a steady dose of opioid, you should be able to drink modest amounts of alcohol without getting any extra unusual effects.

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

The law in the UK allows you to drive if you are taking prescribed opioid medicines in accordance with the instructions from your prescriber (including what your prescriber advises you about driving safely). You should never drive if you feel unsafe. Your ability to drive may be affected by other medicines you are taking in addition to opioids, whether you feel tired and by your pain. You are responsible for making sure you are safe on each occasion that you drive.

The law on drugs and driving in the UK changed in 2015. If your driving is impaired for any reason, including taking medicines, it is illegal to drive. It is also illegal to drive when you have over the specified limits of certain drugs in your blood, like opioids, and you have not been prescribed them, even if you are not impaired.

If a person is taking more than 220mg of morphine a day, they are likely to have a blood level of the medicine which impairs them nearly as much as someone who is over the legal limit of alcohol. 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.

The doses of opioid medicine that are likely to affect your driving are quite high and are above the level that we know is safe and effective for pain treatment.

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). Drinking alcohol reduces the amount of opioid medicine you can take and drive safely with, so do not drive if you have drunk alcohol and taken opioid medicines.

## **Common side effects of opioids**

When you first start taking opioids 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 go on for longer than a few days. Your healthcare team may give you some other medicines to help, such as anti-sickness tablets.

If pain has affected your sleep, opioids may help you to recover your normal pattern, but they should not make you drowsy in the daytime.

Opioid medicines can cause some problems when you take them for long periods of time. These problems include:

- Constipation: this is a common problem when taking opioids and does not tend to go away the longer you take opioid medicines. You may need to try laxatives to treat constipation. If you experience a lot of side effects your team may suggest changing to another opioid medicine
- 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 not be safe for you to take opioids

## **Risks and benefits of opioids**

While opioids are very effective over short periods to relieve moderate to severe pain and 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 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 health increase significantly

when prescribing opioids at high doses for a long period of time. If you take opioid drugs for many months or years, it can affect your body in a number of ways. These problems include:

- Reduced fertility
- Low sex drive
- Irregular periods
- Erectile dysfunction in men (the inability to keep an erection)
- 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 this 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, ask your pharmacist, nurse or doctor .

## **Addiction**

Opioids have a serious risk of addiction, especially with long-term use. Addiction 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. 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 (for example, some of the withdrawal side effects in the next section)
- Feeling that you need to take additional medicines containing opioids or other pain relief medicines to achieve the same relief
- Taking opioid medicines for reasons other than pain relief: for instance, to 'stay calm' or 'help you sleep'
- Experiencing withdrawal side effects when you stop taking the medicine suddenly (see below)

**If you notice any of the above, talk to your doctor or a 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 are blue or purple
- Poor coordination or balance
- Unresponsive or unconscious
- Heavy or unusual snoring
- Difficulty breathing or no breathing
- Very small pupils in the eyes

Your family, friends, and carers should know these signs so they can take immediate action.

**If you think that you or someone else has taken too much of their opioid medicine, dial 999 immediately.**

## **How can I stop taking opioids?**

If you want to try reducing your opioid dose, you should discuss this with your doctor and bring the dose down slowly.

Many people find that after a few months they can take a reduced dose without the pain increasing. 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 you are able to do regular activity and exercise. All of this contributes to greater physical fitness.

## **Withdrawal effects**

Do not stop taking an opioid suddenly because this may cause unpleasant withdrawal side effects. It is important to get the right help and support when you are ready to stop taking your medicine. Talk to your doctor, nurse or a pharmacist, they will be able to help you to come off your opioid medicine slowly to reduce unpleasant withdrawal side effects. Safely coming off opioids can take a long time. Every person is different. Take any unused opioids back to a pharmacy for safe disposal. Withdrawal side effects may include a combination of the following:

- Shivers
- Diarrhoea
- Difficulty sleeping
- Sweating
- Widespread or increased pain
- Body aches

- Irritability and agitation
- Nausea and vomiting

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

## **Where can I find more information and support?**

### **Information on opioid medication:**

- 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 strong opioids for pain relief. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg140/ifp/chapter/About-this-information>
- The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence have information for the public about chronic pain. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng193/informationforpublic>
- NHS website: information on morphine. <https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/morphine/>
- NHS website: information on oxycodone. <https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/oxycodone/>
- NHS website: information on fentanyl. <https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/fentanyl/>
- NHS website: information on buprenorphine. <https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/buprenorphine-for-pain/>
- NHS website: information on dihydrocodeine. <https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/dihydrocodeine/>