

Opioid medications



About this leaflet

This leaflet is aimed at people who have been taking opioids long-term or longer than a month.

Opioid drugs are often effective in reducing new, acute pain. They can also be dangerous, addictive and have significant side effects. When taken for more than a few days, they often become less effective. After a few weeks they usually lead to a reduced quality of life.

Opioid drugs should be used to help you to cope with acute pain, and to breathe, cough and mobilise after an operation, serious injury or an extremely painful new medical condition. As soon as you are able, you should reduce and stop taking them.

This leaflet explains about the possible risks and side effects of taking this type of medication for prolonged periods.

What are opioids?

Opioids are a group of strong painkillers which can help with some but not all types of pain. They are often helpful in acute pain, or pain toward the end of life. They are usually less than helpful in chronic, long-term painful conditions. Examples of opioids include: morphine, heroin (diamorphine), oxycodone, fentanyl, tramadol, codeine, and buprenorphine.

Opioids come in many different forms such as injections, tablets, liquids or patches.

Opioids are never a single solution for pain but should be administered in combination with other strategies.

What are the possible side effects of opioids?

Side effects include:

- reduced clarity of thought; sleepiness; poor memory
- reduced quality of life; reduced pleasure in activities
- nausea, vomiting, constipation and abdominal bloating

- itching; weight gain; loss of sex drive and possibly infertility
- problems sleeping; snoring
- hyperalgesia – increased pain sensitivity and worsening of pain*
- worsening of abdominal pain*
- chronic headaches.

What are tolerance, dependence, withdrawal and addiction?

After taking a few doses, the body inevitably adapts, and opioid drugs become less effective. We call this **tolerance**. You may be tempted to take a higher dose to keep the pain controlled. Beware! You will become tolerant to the higher dose too, and side effects will increase.

Once the body has adapted to opioids, reducing or stopping the drug will cause **withdrawal** symptoms (we call this **dependence**). These symptoms may include increased pain. Beware! This does not necessarily mean that the opioids are helping: if you stay on the reduced dose, you are likely to find that these withdrawal symptoms (including increased pain) will settle over several days. As a result of reducing the dose you will feel better – your pain is unlikely to be worse while the side effects from the opioid drug will reduce.

You may feel out of control regarding how much and when you take the medication, including a strong need to take it despite harmful consequences (including a negative effect on your physical and mental health). You also may desire other effects the opioid has upon you, other than pain relief. These may be a sign of **addiction**. If you feel this may be the case, you must seek help from your doctor.

How long should I take opioids?

If taking opioids after an operation or injury, you should reduce them as soon as the healing process allows. Following an operation or injury, you should usually have stopped opioids within a month. If you are unable to do this you should see your GP to consider why and to discuss what to do.

* For more information type 'opioid induced hyperalgesia' and 'narcotic bowel syndrome' into a search engine such as Google.

If pain persists despite taking opioids, it is likely that they are not helping. You should wean yourself off and stop them. Only if this leads to worsened pain and a reduced quality of life that persists for more than a month should you discuss re-starting opioids with your GP. They will also discuss alternative strategies to manage your pain which may include other types of medication, physical, and/or psychological strategies.

How do I reduce and stop my opioids?

Stopping opioids if you have been on them for some time will usually lead to withdrawal symptoms. These are not dangerous but can be unpleasant. The opioid dose can be reduced gradually to try to make this tolerable. Reduce your daily dose by a small amount – perhaps 10%. Try remaining on the reduced dose for a couple of weeks before reducing it again by the same amount. Your GP will be able to help if you are struggling or unsure how to go about this.

How do I store opioids at home?

- Store opioids clearly labelled in their original containers.
- Ensure children, adolescents or vulnerable people can't access them.
- Keep opioids locked away safely.
- Don't change the dose or the time between doses on your own. Always discuss this with your doctor. Never share your opioids with other people. Inappropriate use can lead to addiction, accidents or death.

What should I do with unused opioids?

Do not hoard opioid medications 'just in case I need them' as they may be found or stolen and used inappropriately and cause harm to others. Return all unused opioids to your pharmacy or doctors' surgery for safe disposal.

Can I drink alcohol?

Alcohol and opioids both cause drowsiness and reduce your ability to concentrate. You should be aware taking other sedating drugs, including alcohol can increase this risk.

Can I drive?

If your driving is impaired for any reason, including taking medicines, it is illegal to drive. UK law allows you to drive if you are taking prescribed opioid medications in the manner they were prescribed and you feel fit to do so. Please see patient information leaflet, RCHT 1505 Driving and pain medications.

Further information

More information is available online:

www.fpm.ac.uk/opioids-aware

www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk/

MHRA (2020) Opioid medicines and the risk of addiction (V1):

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f6a078ed3bf7f7238f23100/Opioid-safety-leaflet-v1-Sep2020.pdf>

The following RCHT documents are also available from our Documents Library:

RCHT Document: Opioid Management Plan Bundle

RCHT Driving and pain medications patient leaflet (RCHT 1505)

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

