



Opioids for persistent pain – patient information

What are opioids?

Opioids are strong pain medications which are made from a natural source (morphine from the opium poppy) or from a synthetic (manmade) source (oxycodone). Strong opioids such as morphine or oxycodone are often taken by people to help with pain following an operation or a significant injury.

They have also been prescribed by doctors to assist a patient to manage their persistent pain condition. Medical research however has showed that the long-term use of opioids for persistent pain may not be beneficial as they may cause unpleasant side effects, may lose their effectiveness and may interfere significantly with normal bodily function.

Opioids for persistent pain are usually given by mouth (orally) in a tablet or liquid form or in the form of a patch that is stuck to the skin (transdermal).

Starting opioids

If a person is unable to function on an everyday basis as a result of living with pain for a long time and they have tried pain medication such as paracetamol or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as Nurofen or other non-drug treatments such as a TENS machine and these have not been helpful then their GP or specialist may suggest trialling an opioid medication.

Opioids will not cure persistent pain but may help to reduce the severity of pain so that a person is able to lead a more normal life and return to activities that the pain was preventing them from participating in. A doctor who prescribes a person opioid medication may ask that they increase their daily activity and become more active again. Opioids do not work for everybody and are not effective for some types of pain such as nerve (neuropathic) pain which is better treated with other types of medication.

If an opioid is prescribed for a persistent pain condition it will usually be commenced at a low dose and then gradually increased by the prescribing doctor so that they can assess if the opioid is helping with the pain and whether there are any side effects. This way the best level of pain relief is found with the least amount of side effects.

Some people find that the opioid does not help with their pain and that it causes unpleasant side effects. In this instance the prescribing doctor will reduce the dose of opioid slowly before stopping it completely. They may then suggest trying another type of opioid or other drugs or treatments for the pain.



Side effects of opioids

- Constipation

It is common for opioid medication to slow the working of the bowel or cause a reduced ability to be able to empty the bowel. A doctor may prescribe a laxative to take with the opioid which will need to be taken regularly for best effect. It is also recommended that people drink plenty of water and eat fresh fruit and vegetables.

- Sedation

People often find that they feel more lethargic when they start an opioid. This will often improve with time as the body gets used to the drug. There are restrictions on driving and heavy machinery use when taking opioid medication and these should be discussed with the prescribing doctor.

- Nausea and Vomiting

Some people may feel sick and vomit while taking opioid medication and a doctor can prescribe medications called anti-emetics to help ease these symptoms.

- Itching

Some people find that their skin gets very itchy when they take an opioid and the doctor may change them to a different opioid.

- Sweating

Some people feel sweaty when they take opioids and this may not improve over time.

- Weight loss or gain

May occur if opioid medication is taken over a long period of time.

- Opioid induced hyperalgesia

Some people find that they experience an increased level of pain as a result of taking opioid medication over a long period of time. For example, an action such as stubbing a toe will produce an exaggerated and long lasting pain. Opioid medication is gradually reduced before being discontinued if hyperalgesia is experienced.



Uncommon side effects

- Loss of sex drive or infertility

Suppression of hormones such as testosterone can occur if opioid medication is taken over a long period of time. Sex drive will return and fertility improve once the opioid medication is stopped.

- Adrenal gland interference

Occasionally a person who takes opioid medication for a long time may become tired, dizzy and thin due to the effect opioid medication can have on their adrenal glands. Once the opioid medication is stopped gland function should return to normal.

What is addiction?

Addiction is when a drug needs to be taken repeatedly so that a feeling of wellbeing and/or pleasure is experienced. This is very different from a person who takes an opioid medication to help reduce their pain so that they can enjoy a more normal life. While it is rare for someone who is taking an opioid medication for a pain condition over a long period of time to become addicted their body will become used to the opioid over time and this is called 'opioid tolerance'. Opioid tolerance is very different to opioid addiction.

When a person takes an opioid over a long period of time their body becomes used to the drug and as a result produces less endorphins which is its own natural opioid. If an opioid medication is stopped suddenly then a person may experience symptoms of withdrawal from the opioid. This may include feeling sweaty, agitated and experiencing diarrhoea. A person might also become depressed with the return of their pain. Starting the opioid again will relieve these symptoms.

It is very important that if opioid medication is to be stopped that it is done gradually over a period of time under the supervision of a doctor. A doctor may prescribe a medication called Clonidine to ease the symptoms of withdrawal.

Storing opioids

It is very important that opioids are kept in a safe place away from children. Only the person for whom the opioid is prescribed should take them.



Driving a motor vehicle

When starting opioid medication, it is recommended that a person should not drive a vehicle or operate heavy machinery in the first few days of starting the medication or while increasing the dose as opioids can cause sleepiness and dizziness. Once a person is stabilised on an opioid and takes the same dose at the same time each day they are usually fit to drive however a person should not drive if opioids continue to cause drowsiness. Although the prescribing doctor will give advice on driving while taking opioids it is up to the person to decide whether they are fit to drive.

Particular care should be taken if alcohol is consumed while taking opioid medication as this combination may cause extreme drowsiness and poor concentration. Taking sedative medication (such as Diazepam) and opioids is also known to affect driving performance. Extreme care or avoiding driving is recommended.

Further information about driving while taking opioids can be found at Transport SA:

<www.transport.sa.gov.au/personal_transport/driving/index.asp>

How long should opioid medications be taken for?

If a person finds that an opioid medication is reducing their pain and allowing them to live a more active life then they should continue to take the medication. They should attend regular appointments with their doctor while they take the medication.

If the opioid medication is not helpful for a person's pain then they should stop taking it.

Stopping an opioid

If a person is to stop or reduce their dose of opioid medication they must first discuss this with their doctor. Just as the dose of an opioid is gradually increased when started so it also needs to be gradually decreased to prevent symptoms of withdrawal. Any unused opioid medication should be returned to a doctor or a pharmacy where they may be disposed of safely.