

Medicines Management

Opioid medicines – information for patients



What are opioids?

Opioids are known as controlled drugs and there are strict laws about how they can be produced, stored, supplied, prescribed and destroyed. Examples of opioids include codeine (including co-codamol), tramadol, oxycodone, fentanyl, and morphine. These medications are safe to use when taken under the guidance of a qualified healthcare professional.

Opioids are a type of medicine that help relieve pain. They are very effective over short periods to relieve moderate to severe pain. They are also sometimes prescribed for long periods to relieve pain in serious conditions.

Opioids have a serious risk of addiction, especially with long-term use. The person who prescribed your opioid or your pharmacist should explain how long it is safe for you to take your medicine for.

For further information on using opioids safely, and a full list of possible side effects, please read the patient information leaflet (PIL) that came with your medicine.

Always follow the directions on the packaging of your medicines. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you are not sure about anything.

How is opioid medication prescribed?

Opioids can be prescribed as:

- Tablets, capsules, or liquids (to be taken by mouth)
- Patches to put on your skin
- Injections given by a doctor or nurse
- A 24 hour syringe pump (if frequent injections are needed) to achieve good control of pain
- Lozenges (to be sucked)
- Nasal sprays
- Suppositories (inserted in your body).

Are there any instructions I need to follow?

There are important instructions you need to follow when taking your opioid medication:

- Only take the prescribed dose. Do not increase the dose or take an extra dose
- **Never** share your medicine with other people. It has been prescribed for you

- Keep your medicines out of reach and sight of children and young people
- Store your medicines safely in a locked cupboard or storage box that only agreed people can access
- Store your medicines away from direct sunlight, heat or moisture
- **Do not** take any other medicines that contain opioids to “top up” your pain relief.
- **Do not** take opioid medicines if you are pregnant without health professional advice
- **Always** follow the directions on the label to make sure you take the correct dose. For liquids, always make sure the dose is measured out properly and never take a ‘swig from the bottle’. Your pharmacist can give you a measuring cup or spoon
- If you are using patches, **always** make sure that the last patch is removed before applying a new one. **Do not** place hot water bottles or heat pads directly over the patch while it is on and **do not** soak in a hot bath or use saunas as this could cause too much medicine to come out of the patch leading to an overdose
- At the beginning of treatment or when changing your regular dose, you should avoid driving or doing other tasks that need particular concentration and attention.

If you think your medicines have been stolen, please tell a health professional.

Are there any side effects?

Common side effects may include:

- Nausea (more common at the start)
- Constipation
- Drowsiness
- Confusion
- Dizziness.

If your medication is effective but causes side effects, there are ways of managing these to help you to continue treatment. Ask your nurse or doctor for advice. **Do not stop taking your medicine suddenly.**

What are the signs of addiction and what should I do?

Opioids have a serious risk of addiction, especially with long-term use. The person who prescribed your opioid medication or your pharmacist should explain how long it is safe for you to take your medicine for.

Addiction can happen gradually. It 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 does not help to relieve your pain.

An early warning sign that you are at risk of becoming addicted is if your body stops sensing the pain-relieving effect of your opioid medicine. This is called 'opioid tolerance'.

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
- 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 e.g. shivers, diarrhoea, difficulty sleeping, sweating, widespread or increased pain, body aches, irritability and agitation, nausea and vomiting.

What should I do if I take too much?

High doses or overdoses of opioid medication can suppress breathing to a dangerous level. An early warning sign of this is small (pinpoint) pupils.

If you have taken more than the prescribed dose or somebody else has taken your opioid medication, contact your doctor or local community pharmacy. Alternatively, call 111 (available 24 hours). In an emergency call 999 for an ambulance.

Remember to keep the medicine container to show the medical team.

How do I dispose of controlled drugs I no longer need?

Opioid medicines are controlled drugs which **MUST** be returned to your community pharmacy if they are no longer being used.

You **MUST NOT** throw them away yourself. If you cannot take them to your pharmacy yourself, ask someone responsible to do this for you.

Will nurses or carers check my controlled drugs when they visit?

Nurses or carers who visit your home may count and record your controlled drugs. This is to help them to check that you have used the right amount and that the drugs are stored safely.

If any medicine appears to be missing or cannot be accounted for, the nurse must tell their senior manager, who may then tell the police. The police may wish to contact you directly and may need to investigate further.

How do I collect my prescriptions?

You, your family or your carers are responsible for collecting your medicines from your local pharmacy.

Our nurses do not collect and deliver opioids.

Please speak to your nurse if you need more information and help with your medicines.

Useful information

You can ask your general practitioner (GP), nurse or your local community pharmacist for advice

For impartial and confidential advice or information on the services provided by Bridgewater or to receive this leaflet in an alternative format call our Patient Services team on 0800 587 0562.