

# Frequently Asked Questions about Opioids

Specialist Palliative Care

## Introduction

This leaflet is intended to answer some of the frequently asked questions about opioids, whilst also dispelling some myths. What are opioid drugs?

Opioid medicines are drugs used for moderate to severe pain. They will additionally sometimes be used to relieve breathlessness or a cough. Common examples of strong opioids are:

- Morphine
- Alfentanil
- Oxycodone
- Fentanyl
- Buprenorphine.

These opioids come as different brands and not all brands are the same. Therefore once you have started on a brand it is recommended that you stick to that brand. If you notice that the opioid medicine you have been given looks different in any way to what you have previously received, please discuss this with your pharmacist.

## How do I take or apply opioids?

### Regular pain relief

Opioids can be given in several ways. You will usually be prescribed a regular opioid for which the frequency will differ depending on what you are prescribed, for example, every 12 hours for modified-release tablets or capsules, or once a week for certain patches. This is to treat the pain that you have all the time which is called 'background pain'.

Name of medication:.....

When to take / apply it: .....

If applying a patch, this may not need changing every day so check how often it should be changed with the prescriber. After removing the previous patch, apply a new patch to clean, dry, hair-free skin and check it is sticking well.

**The prevention of infection is a major priority in all healthcare and everyone has a part to play.**

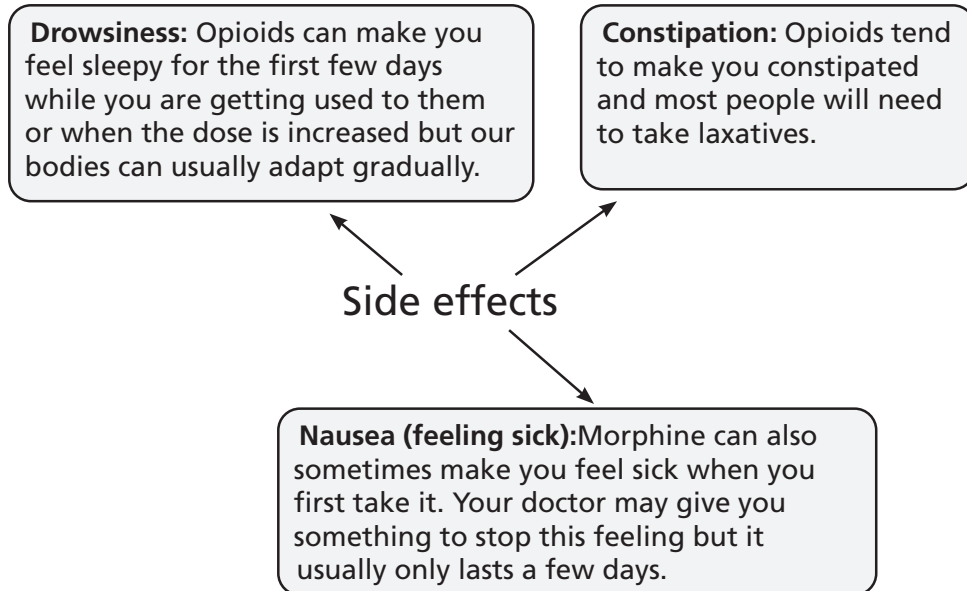
- Please decontaminate your hands frequently for 20 seconds using soap and water or alcohol gel if available
- If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting, cough or other respiratory symptoms, a temperature or any loss of taste or smell please do not visit the hospital or any other care facility and seek advice from 111
- Keep the environment clean and tidy
- Let's work together to keep infections out of our hospitals and care homes.

### When Required pain relief

However, you may experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due. The duration and cause of this pain will differ from person to person. Therefore you will also be prescribed a faster acting medicine for these episodes of pain. This is for when your pain suddenly gets worse and you need something extra.

If you experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due, then you should take an additional dose of the quick acting opioid that you have been prescribed. If you find you are having to take a lot of additional doses, let your doctor or nurse know.

## What are the main side effects to look out for?



### If I take opioids for pain, why do I need other painkillers?

Although opioids are very good painkillers, they are not helpful for all types of pain. Other treatments may be needed and suggested by your doctor or nurse.

### Can you drive when you are taking opioids?

Current drug driving legislation in England and Wales states that it is illegal to drive when taking strong opioids if the medication impairs a patient's ability to drive. 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). It is also unsafe to drive immediately after taking a 'when required' dose of opioid.

It remains the responsibility of all drivers to consider whether they believe their driving may be impaired on every occasion when they drive.

Recent advice from the Department of Transport recommends carrying evidence that you have been prescribed an opioid medication by a doctor in case you are stopped by the Police. This can be in the form of your prescription or a copy of the specific advice given by your prescriber in a clinic letter.

## How will I know if the opioids are not going to work for some of my pain?

You may still have pain despite taking bigger doses of opioid medications and may feel unwell in one or more of these ways:

- More sleepy
- Feeling sick more of the time
- Restlessness and jumpiness
- Bad dreams
- Difficulty having bowels open.

If this happens tell your doctor or nurse. Your dose of opioids may be reduced and other treatments may be suggested to help your pain.

## Myth busters

Myth	Truth
I can not drink alcohol when I take opioids	<b>FALSE.</b> You can drink small amounts (For example, a small glass of wine, beer or spirits) but it may make you feel more sleepy
I must be at the end of life if they are giving me opioids	<b>FALSE.</b> Opioids are given for different sorts of moderate to severe pain that may be as a variety of significant health conditions and are not just given at the end of life.
If I take opioids I will get addicted	<b>FALSE.</b> Taking opioids for pain or shortness of breath will not make you an addict. It is quite normal for the dose to increase over time, although many people remain on a stable dose for long periods.
If I keep taking opioids, I will reach the maximum dose quickly and they will run out of medications for my pain	<b>FALSE.</b> Your dose will be appropriately adjusted according to your pain to the most effective dose under close supervision of the prescribing healthcare professional. There is no maximum dose and occasionally, a person who has pain due to an underlying long-term condition, may require high doses indefinitely. This will be assessed on an individual basis but is usually very well tolerated.

Myth	Truth
I have run out of my medication, I will just stop it until I get my next prescription	<b>FALSE.</b> As with other medicines, you should not stop taking opioids suddenly without discussing this with your doctor or nurse as your body needs time to adjust and stopping suddenly will make you unwell. If you no longer need to take opioids, your doctor or nurse will reduce the dose gradually.

## How do I store my opioids at home?

Keep the medicines in their original containers, clearly labelled and stored safely at room temperature in a dry place. Make sure that they are well out of reach and sight of children.

The label should provide storage instructions but check with your pharmacist if you are unsure.

## What should I do with any opioids that are no longer needed?

Opioids that are no longer needed should be returned to the pharmacist for safe disposal. Do not flush them down the toilet or throw them away.

## Further prescribing and follow up

Your GP or your hospital doctor will provide you with further prescriptions for your opioid medications. It is very important that you never run out of your medication.

If you need advice or have problems out of normal hours contact your out of hours GP service or District Nurse or Community Palliative Care Team.

## Contact Details

Palliative Care Team: 01902 695212

## **English**

**If you need information in another way like easy read or a different language please let us know.**

**If you need an interpreter or assistance please let us know.**

## **Lithuanian**

**Jeigu norėtumėte, kad informacija jums būtų pateikta kitu būdu, pavyzdžiui, supaprastinta forma ar kita kalba, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.**

**Jeigu jums reikia vertėjo ar kitos pagalbos, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.**

## **Polish**

**Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo otrzymać te informacje w innej postaci, na przykład w wersji łatwej do czytania lub w innym języku, prosimy powiedzieć nam o tym.**

**Prosimy poinformować nas również, jeżeli potrzebowaliby Państwo usługi tłumaczenia ustnego lub innej pomocy.**

## **Punjabi**

**ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ, ਜਿਵੇਂ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਾਨ ਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ, ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।**

**ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਏ ਦੀ ਜਾਂ ਸਹਾਇਤਾ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।**

## **Romanian**

**Dacă aveți nevoie de informații în alt format, ca de exemplu caractere ușor de citit sau altă limbă, vă rugăm să ne informați.**

**Dacă aveți nevoie de un interpret sau de asistență, vă rugăm să ne informați.**

## **Traditional Chinese**

**如果您需要以其他方式了解信息，如易读或其他语种，请告诉我们。**

**如果您需要口译人员或帮助，请告诉我们。**