

Taking strong opioids

What are strong opioids and how do they work?

Strong opioids are a group of painkillers which includes morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl and methadone. When used correctly, at the right dose, they are proven to be safe. They provide pain relief by acting on areas of the brain and spinal cord to block pain signals.

They are used to treat many types of pain, such as cancer pain and pain after surgery, but not all pains respond to them. It is often necessary to also take other painkillers that work in a different way to control the pain. More specific information about each drug is available separately.

How are strong opioids taken?

These medicines come in many different forms such as tablets, capsules, liquids, patches, injections, lozenges and sprays. Details of each specific medicine can be found in the Product Information Leaflet (PIL) supplied with each prescription.

When should I take my strong opioid medication?

For continuous long-term pain you may be given a slow release tablet or patch which releases a controlled amount of medicine into your body. Your doctor or specialist nurse will find the best way to manage your pain and adjust the dose to try and give you pain relief most of the time, keeping any side effects to a minimum.

Short-acting liquids and capsules can be used to 'top up' for sudden but temporary flare-ups

of severe pain, but they do not give long-lasting pain relief.

What does should I take?

The correct dose of any medicine is the lowest dose that produces a noticeable benefit. It is unusual to get complete relief of pain using strong opioids, so the aim is to keep your pain at a tolerable level which does not affect your quality of life. Always take the dose which has been prescribed for you. If you feel it is not high enough, or that the side effects are too much, please discuss this with your doctor or specialist nurse.

How long will they take to work?

This depends on the form that has been prescribed. Fast acting liquids or capsules can work within an hour and last for 2-4 hours. Slow release tablets and patches can take up to two days to have a noticeable effect, and longer still before the level of drug in your body has reached a stable amount.

Does being prescribed strong opioids mean I'm dying?

Drugs like morphine and other strong painkillers are recommended when there is severe pain. They can be used after a serious accident or an operation, as well as for cancer pain or other conditions where pain is not controlled by more simple painkillers. Being prescribed these medicines does not mean that you are dying, and it should improve your quality of life.

What side effects might I have?

When you first start taking strong opioids you may experience the following side effects, which usually wear off within a few days:

- Dizziness
- Feeling sick and/or vomiting - about a third of people starting strong opioids can feel sick or even vomit in the first week to ten days of treatment. Fortunately, these symptoms usually disappear after this time. An anti-sickness tablet can be prescribed for you to help you through this time. There are other causes of vomiting and nausea (it may not be the strong opioids) so if you are concerned, please speak to your doctor or specialist nurse.
- Sleepiness and/or confusion – when they start taking strong opioids or have their dose increased some people feel more sleepy or drowsy than usual for a few days. They may even feel a little muddled or confused. For most people, this quickly wears off. If the drugs affect you in this way, you must not drive or operate dangerous machinery. Strong opioids can help people to recover their normal sleep pattern, but shouldn't cause daytime sleepiness.
- Constipation - almost everybody who takes strong opioids gets constipated. You should make sure your doctor or specialist nurse prescribes a laxative, which you need to take regularly. Constipation can also be helped by eating more fruit, vegetables, brown bread, bran based breakfast cereals and drinking plenty of liquids. When taken for a longer time, strong opioids can cause other problems, including sweating, blurring of vision, dry mouth, itching, difficulty passing urine, vivid dreams, hallucinations, weight gain and a lack of sex drive.

What if I forget or miss a dose?

This will depend on what strong opioid you are taking. Please refer to the specific information that you have been given for your prescribed drug. If you are not sure what to do, contact your specialist nurse or GP. **Do not** take two doses together.

Will I need to have my doses increased to control my pain?

Sometimes it is necessary to steadily increase the doses of strong opioids, particularly when beginning treatment, in order to work out the right dose for you. This is done slowly and steadily over a few days or weeks. Further dose adjustments may sometimes be necessary, but this usually only happens if the pain itself is getting worse. It does not necessarily mean that the drugs are losing their effect and that you are developing a tolerance to them.

Will I become addicted?

It is rare for people in pain to become addicted to strong opioids, but we don't know for sure which patients may be affected in this way.

Symptoms of addiction include: feeling out of control about how much of the medicine is being taken, cravings, continuing to take the medicine despite feeling worse physically and mentally.

If another treatment is possible that takes the pain away, for example radiotherapy, it may be possible to reduce or even stop them, under supervision.

What about driving?

Taking strong opioids does not automatically mean you cannot drive. If asked by the police, you have to prove that you have taken the strong opioids as prescribed and that you are not feeling drowsy or confused. Please see our separate leaflet on medications and

driving. We advise that you should not drive after starting strong opioids or while your doses are being adjusted.

At levels above the equivalent of 220mg of morphine over 24 hours, it is unlikely that it is safe for you to drive. Your doctor or specialist nurse will advise you if your prescribed dose is approaching this level. Remember - ultimately the decision and the risk lies with you.

Can I drink alcohol?

It is generally safe to drink alcohol with most strong opioid preparations but do check the PIL. However, you are likely to find that the combination of these drugs with alcohol make you feel sleepy or drunk much sooner than usual, therefore it is sensible to drink less than you are used to until you know what sort of effect it has on you.

Can I take strong opioids for a long period of time?

While these drugs can have a positive benefit for some people living with long-term pain, they can have serious consequences when they are not providing enough pain relief or being taken in a way that was not intended.

It is important to consider the risks and benefits of long-term therapy with the person who prescribed it on a regular basis. Medical research suggests that the risk to your health increases significantly when taking strong opioids at high doses for a long period of time.

If you take strong opioids for many months or years it can affect your body in a number of ways including: reduced ability to fight infection, increased levels of pain, reduced fertility, low sex drive, irregular periods, and erectile dysfunction (an inability to sustain an erection).

If you are worried about any of these problems and/or you want to try reducing your dose, please discuss with your doctor or specialist nurse as this must be done slowly.

Do not stop strong opioids suddenly, as there is a risk of a severe withdrawal reaction, with symptoms such as tiredness, sweating, runny nose, stomach cramps, diarrhoea and aching muscles.

Keep a diary of the doses and times of any medications you take when your pain flares up and any changes to your long acting strong opioids, and have this available for your doctor or specialist nurse each time you see them. In the diary, also keep note of the frequency of your bowel motions or any other side effects that you are noticing.

Other important information

Strong opioids are controlled drugs and need looking after carefully. As with all medicines, always keep them out of sight, and especially away from children.

Please return any unused medications to your pharmacy.

Remember to always let your doctor/specialist nurse/pharmacist know that you are taking strong opioids if you ask their advice about other problems, including buying over the counter medications.

For further information, please visit the opioids aware website

<http://www.fpm.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware>

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