

OPIOID MEDICINES AND THE RISK OF ADDICTION

This safety leaflet is to help support you in using opioid medicines safely. Please keep it in a safe place. Patients, family, friends, and carers can play an important role in the safe use of these medicines and in reducing the risk of harm. Please share this information with them.

What are opioid medicines and what's the risk with them?

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. Examples of opioids include codeine (including co-codamol), tramadol, fentanyl, and morphine.

Opioids have a serious risk of **addiction**, especially with long-term use. The person who prescribed an 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, read the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) that came with your medicine, and keep it handy. For information on driving while taking opioid medicines, please refer to <https://www.gov.uk/drug-driving-law>.

How can I take my opioid medicine safely?

Only take the medicine as directed.

- **Do not** increase the dose or take an extra dose
- **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

Do not do any of these without first talking to the person who prescribed the medicine or to a pharmacist. Taking more than you should can lead to overdose.

If you have any questions about your opioid medicine or side effects, or if you do not understand how to take your medicine, **talk to** the person who prescribed your opioid medicine or to a pharmacist. **Keep talking** to them about your pain – there may be different treatments that can help.

- **Do not allow others** to take any opioid medicines given to you. Your medicine has been prescribed or specifically recommended for you by your doctor or pharmacist and can be dangerous if taken by other people – it could even cause fatal overdose.
- **Always keep medicines out of sight and reach of children.**

How do I know if I'm becoming addicted?

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 doesn't help to relieve your pain.

Talk to your doctor if your pain is becoming difficult to manage as your body may not be sensing its pain-relieving effect. This is referred to as 'opioid tolerance' and could be an early warning sign you may be at risk of becoming addicted.

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 medicine packaging, even if it is causing bad effects on your overall health (for example, some of the withdrawal side effects in the next section)
- 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
- Experiencing withdrawal side effects when you stop taking the medicine suddenly (see below).

If you notice any of the above, talk to your doctor or a pharmacist.

How can I safely stop taking my opioid medicine?

If you have been taking your opioid medicine for a long time, **do not stop taking it suddenly** because this may cause unpleasant withdrawal side effects. It is important to get the right help and support when you are ready to stop taking your medicine.

Talk to your doctor, nurse or a pharmacist. They will be able to help you to come off your opioid medicine slowly to reduce unpleasant withdrawal side effects. Safely coming off opioids can take a long time. Every person is different. Take any unused opioids back to a pharmacy for safe disposal.

Withdrawal side effects may include a combination of the following:

- Shivers
- Sweating
- Body aches
- Diarrhoea
- Widespread or increased pain
- Irritability and agitation
- Difficulty sleeping
- Nausea and vomiting

If you experience any of the above talk to the person who prescribed your medicine or a pharmacist.

Babies born to women who took opioids during pregnancy may need to be carefully monitored for withdrawal effects after birth. Talk to your doctor or midwife if you are worried.

What may happen if I have taken too much opioid medicine?

Taking too much opioid medicine, whether intentional or not, is called an overdose. This can be very serious and may cause death.

Some of the signs that someone is experiencing an overdose include:

- Confusion or hallucinations
- Unresponsive or unconscious
- Slurred speech
- Heavy or unusual snoring
- Lips or fingernails are blue or purple
- Difficulty breathing or no breathing
- Poor coordination or balance
- Very small pupils in the eyes

Your family, friends, and carers should know these signs so they can take immediate action.

If you think that you or someone else has taken too much of their opioid medicine, dial 999 immediately.

If you experience side-effects to your opioid medicines you can report these directly to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency at www.gov.uk/yellowcard, via the free apps ('Yellow Card Scheme' in the Google Play Store or 'Yellow Card – MHRA' in the Apple App Store), or by phoning the free phone line (0800 731 6789).



If you have feedback regarding this leaflet or would like access to the information in an alternative format or language, please email pals@ydh.nhs.uk.