

you see how the opioids affect you as it is highly likely that your reactions and alertness will be affected. You should NOT drive if your dose has changed or if you feel unsafe.

You do not have to inform the Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) that you are starting an opioid. However, there may be other information about your illness that the DVLA needs to know. Contact the DVLA for the most recent guidance:

www.gov.uk/government/collections/drug-driving

Is it safe to drink alcohol when I am taking opioids?

Alcohol and opioids together cause sleepiness and poor concentration. You should avoid alcohol completely when you first start on opioids or when your dose has just been increased. When you get on a steady dose of opioid, you should be able to drink modest amounts of alcohol without getting any extra unusual effects.

Dependency and addiction

It is rare for palliative care patients to become addicted when they are taking opioids for pain relief. However, as your body may become used to the opioid medicine, you may experience symptoms of withdrawal (sweating, stomach cramps, diarrhoea, aching muscles) and the return of your pain if you:

- stop taking it suddenly
- lower the dose too quickly
- run out of your medicine

Your healthcare team should offer you frequent reviews and supply you with more medication when you need it. Please discuss any concerns you have about your medication with your healthcare team.

It is important that you do not stop your medication suddenly without speaking your healthcare team first.

Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or

whh-tr.whitthealthPALS@nhs.net

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please contact us on 020 7288 3182. We will try our best to meet your needs.

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Strong Opioid Painkillers in Palliative Care

A patient, family and carers guide

This leaflet gives information about strong opioids taken by mouth or in patch form. Opioids that need to be given by injection should only be given under the guidance of a healthcare professional.



What are opioid painkillers?

Opioid painkillers are a group of medicines used for many years to treat pain. They are either made from the opium poppy or are chemically related to medicines made from opium. Some examples of strong opioid painkillers are morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl and methadone. Strong opioids are used to treat severe pain that is not relieved by simple painkillers alone, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, or weaker opioids such as codeine.

How do they work?

Opioids provide pain relief by imitating the body's natural pain relievers. They prevent your brain from sending out messages to the body to tell you that you are in pain. You still have the pain and it does not treat the cause of the pain. Opioids can also be used to help manage breathlessness.

How effective are they likely to be?

Opioids are very effective at reducing pain intensity and there is good evidence for their use in reducing severe pain. It is unusual for opioids to stop pain completely. The aim of treatment is to reduce your pain enough to help you get on with your life. Some types of pain might respond better to other medicines than to opioids. Your healthcare team will only prescribe opioids for you if they think they are the best treatment for your type of pain.

How much do I take and how often?

The amount needed to control pain varies from person to person. There is no standard dose of opioid and pain is a very personal experience. You will usually start with a low dose and gradually build up until you find the dose that suits you.

Pain that doesn't go away and is always present is called background pain. It is important to control background pain by taking a dose at a regular time each day. If you are able to take medicines by mouth, then these will be a modified release or sustained release medicine. These take a few hours to start reducing pain and last up to 12 hours.

Alternatively, you may use opioid patches that release medication through the skin. Pain relief can last from three to seven days depending on the type of patch.

A sudden and intense pain, in addition to the background pain, is called breakthrough pain. You can also have an additional short-acting (immediate release) medicine which you should take when you experience breakthrough pain. It can take 20-30 minutes to start reducing pain and should last for up to four hours.

If you feel the dose is not enough, you should discuss this with your healthcare team, who will adjust the dose to give you pain relief for most of the time, without too many side effects.

What about the side effects of opioids?

When you first start taking opioids, you may experience some of the following:

- feeling sick (nausea)
- being sick (vomiting)
- feeling dizzy
- feeling sleepy
- feeling confused

These side effects usually go away after a few days, but can sometimes go on for longer. Your healthcare team may give you other medicines to help, such as anti-sickness tablets.

Feeling dizzy, sleepy, or confused can impair your concentration and may affect your ability to drive and undertake other manual tasks.

Constipation is another common problem which affects nearly all people on opioids. This can be treated easily with the appropriate medicines but may take time to work so it is important to take them regularly if needed.

If you experience many side effects, your healthcare team may suggest changing to another opioid medicine.

Can I drive if I am taking opioids?

UK law allows you to drive if you are taking opioid medicines. You are responsible for making sure you are fit to drive.

It is important that you do not drive until