

Opioids Prescribed For Pain Relief

This leaflet will give you an idea of what to expect when you are prescribed an opioid by a healthcare professional

In this leaflet we will talk about:

- What are opioids?
- What are the risks when taking opioids?
- Do opioids work for pain?
- Ways of living well with pain
- Deciding whether you still need to take opioid medication.



You will be involved in all decisions that are made about your care.

Please speak to your GP practice or specialist team if you have questions or concerns after reading this leaflet.



What are opioids?

Opioids are medications that a healthcare professional might give you a prescription for to help relieve pain. Opioids work by “turning off” nerves thought to cause pain, which then reduces the experience of pain.

Opioids are good for short-term pain, for example if you have been injured or have had an operation. However, only 1 in 10 people will find that taking opioids for longer periods of time helps with their pain.

We used to think that opioids were useful for people with long-lasting pain. However, as we have done more research, we have learned that opioids do not help with long-lasting pain for most people. We also learned that taking opioids for a longer period of time can cause side effects, you can become addicted to them, or they can even cause early death.

These are some examples of opioids:

- Buprenorphine
- Codeine and Co-codamol
- Dihydrocodeine and co-dydramol
- Fentanyl
- Morphine
- Oxycodone
- Tramadol



What are the risks?

Like all medicines, opioids have downsides.

Here are some examples of common side effects that people might have when taking opioids:

- Feeling dizzy and/or feeling or being sick
- Feeling confused and sleepy, or having sleep problems
- Finding it hard to poo (constipation)
- Itching
- Weight gain
- Difficulty breathing at night (most common if you are overweight and if you snore heavily). This can be life threatening.

Some of the other downsides when used longer term:

- Risk of falls and fractures
- Reduced fertility (ability to have children)
- Low sex drive and erectile dysfunction (ability to have sex)
- Increased levels of pain
- After a while, your body gets used to the medication, which means you need more medication to relieve the pain. This means you could get more side effects.



It is possible to become addicted to prescribed opioids, even if you take them correctly, because your body becomes used to taking opioids.

Please speak to your healthcare professional about slowly stopping taking opioid medication.



Do opioids work for pain?

While we know that opioids do not work if you take them regularly for a long time, they do help reduce pain for a small amount of people.

Living well with pain

Medication will not usually take away your pain completely, and after a while your body will get used to the opioid medication. This means it will not work as well, if at all, to relieve your pain. Because of this, you should look at what else you can do to improve your experience of pain.

Pain specialists often recommend taking a supported self-management approach to your pain, focusing on using a mix of skills and strategies to support you to live well with your pain.

We will work with you to find out what else you can do to improve your experience of pain. This can include thinking more about your activity levels, doing things to help you relax and doing more gentle movement, such as Tai Chi.

Resources to help manage pain

For information about how you can live well with pain without having to rely on medication, visit:

www.staffsstoke.icb.nhs.uk/doyouknowthesideeffects

Reviewing opioids

Most people will notice that they no longer have pain about 3 months after an injury or surgery.

If pain lasts longer than this, it is often because the part of your body which sends messages back and forth between your brain and your body (the nervous system) is still producing pain, even though your body has healed.

It is important to review opioids after you have been taking them for a while, to make sure that there is still a benefit to you taking them. When reviewing opioids, you might consider:

- Can I do more of what I enjoy?
- Am I getting side effects?
- Can I take less of the medication and still feel better?
- Is there anything else I can do to improve my pain?

When you meet with your healthcare professional to talk about what medications you are taking, you might talk about reducing how much you take or even stopping taking opioids. This may help to:

- Reduce side effects
- Reduce the risk of long-term harm
- Improve quality and enjoyment of life

You might feel worried about reducing or stopping your opioids if you have been taking them for a long time. This is normal, but you can ask your GP practice or pain specialist for help. They can discuss what to expect and how they can support you.

