

Strong Opioids: Information for Patients

Opioids are a group of medicines used to treat pain. Your healthcare team think that opioid medication will help to manage your pain and improve your quality of life. This leaflet gives you more information about opioids and answers some of the commonly asked questions.

When and why are strong opioids used?

Opioids have been used for many years to successfully treat pain. Strong opioids are usually used after initial treatment with other pain killers such as paracetamol or weak opioids such as codeine or tramadol. Strong opioids include drugs such as morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl and buprenorphine. Strong opioids are often used in combination with other pain killers that help nerve pain such as gabapentin, pregabalin or amitriptyline.

How effective are strong opioids?

Each person experiences pain differently so it is important that your treatment is tailored to your needs. Although strong opioids are often effective in controlling pain, it may be that it is not possible to completely get rid of the pain. The aim of treatment is to reduce your pain enough to improve your quality of life.

How do I take strong opioids?

Morphine and Oxycodone are taken by mouth and are tablets that slowly release the pain relieving drug over a period of 12 hours. It is therefore important to take these tablets every 12 hours, morning and evening, to provide constant pain relief.

You will usually also be given some opioid medicine which works quickly (fast release) to take when breakthrough pain occurs. These painkillers start working within about 30minutes and last for 4-6 hours. Fast release morphine is most often given in liquid form called Oramorph and fast relief Oxycodone is called Oxynorm (this is available in liquid and tablet form). Fentanyl is usually given in the form of a patch which sticks to the skin and is changed every 72 hours. The pain relieving medicine is absorbed through the skin. Buprenorphine patches are also used and these are most commonly changed on a weekly basis.

What are the main side effects to look out for?

When you first start taking strong opioids, you *may* get some side effects which typically reduce over a few days.

These include: feeling sick or vomiting, confusion, constipation and sleepiness. If necessary, anti sickness medication and laxatives can be used. If these symptoms continue, it is important to discuss this with your healthcare team.

Will I have to take morphine forever?

Like all medication, your strong opioid painkillers will be regularly reviewed by your healthcare team. It may be possible to reduce or stop your opioids in the future if you have less pain than you do now. However, if the cause of the pain itself is still there, it may be that you will need to carry on taking the opioids.

Is there a maximum dose?

The maximum dose will be determined by what your pain needs, and what dose your body will tolerate. There may come a point where the side-effects are too problematic for you, or where you or your doctor conclude that the medication is not going to work for your pain. Other than this there is no specific maximum for these medications.

Will I become addicted to strong opioids?

Taking strong opioids when you have pain is highly unlikely to lead to addiction. It is important however, as with other medicines, not to suddenly stop your opioid medication without discussing this with your healthcare team.

How should I store my opioid medication?

Like all medication, strong opioids should be kept in a safe place and out of the reach of children.

Can I drink alcohol while taking strong opioids?

Alcohol and opioids together can cause sleepiness and poor concentration. When you first start on opioids, or when your dose has just been increased, you should avoid alcohol completely. You should also avoid alcohol completely if you are driving while taking strong opioids. Once you are on a steady dose of opioid you should be able to drink alcohol in moderation without experiencing any unusual effects.

Can I drive while taking strong opioids?

All medications can affect people differently. Taking strong opioids does not automatically mean that you cannot drive. If you are on a stable dose of medication and your symptoms are well controlled you are usually safe to drive. However you are advised to discuss this with your doctor and also inform the DVLA and your insurance company so that you continue to be insured

How will I be followed up?

Once on opioids, it is important that you are regularly reviewed either by your GP, District Nurse, Hospital Doctor or Specialist Palliative Care Nurse.

Who should I contact out of hours if I have concerns?

Your first point of call should always be your GP Practice Out of Hours or District Nurse service. Norfolk wide specialist palliative care advice is now available 24/7 for professionals to contact in an emergency if necessary.

