



Taking Opioids for Chronic (long-term) Pain

We have given you this leaflet because you take an opioid medication, such as **morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, tramadol, buprenorphine, and codeine**. They are very good painkillers for short-term pain after an accident (such as a broken bone) or surgery when pain relief is needed for a few days or weeks. Opioids are also necessary to help people manage the pain associated with cancer.

However, we now know that opioids do not help long-term non-cancerous pain, and more importantly, are not safe to continue to take for extended periods of time.

Long-term use can cause side effects, addiction, or even an early death.

Side effects of long-term use of opioids

If you take opioid drugs for many months or years, it can affect your body in several ways:

- reduced fertility
- low sex drive
- irregular periods
- erectile dysfunction
- hot flushes
- reduced ability to fight infection
- depression
- osteoporosis
- problems sleeping at night, including snoring or difficulty breathing
- poor concentration and poor memory
- opioid- induced hypersensitivity- taking opioids for a long time can make you more sensitive to pain. Stopping opioids will reverse this effect, so you may find your pain gets better once you've stopped taking opioids.

Tolerance, dependence, and addiction

Over time, you may develop a tolerance to the opioid meaning it will become less effective for you, and your body will also become dependent on the medication, so if you try to stop the opioid suddenly you will get withdrawal symptoms, such as sweating, stomach cramps, diarrhoea, a runny nose, tiredness, and aching muscles.

Some people can become addicted to opioids and will continue to take the medication in ever increasing doses even when it has a negative effect on their physical and mental health.

Driving and opioids

A drug driving law was introduced in March 2015, which advises a maximum opioid blood level to be able to drive safely. Tests showed that people with higher blood levels had slower reaction and decision times increasing their risk of accidents, like that of a drink-driver, particularly if the opioids were mixed with other medications such as diazepam, amitriptyline, gabapentin, pregabalin, or any other drug that can cause drowsiness and/or central nervous system effects. **Whatever drugs you are taking, you must never drive if you do not feel safe to do so.**

What if you want to stop taking an opioid, or lower your risks by reducing your daily dose?

Do not stop taking your opioid suddenly, you may experience unpleasant withdrawal symptoms.

If you want to try reducing your dose, you can discuss this with the surgery's clinical pharmacist who will help you to bring your dose down slowly.

Please contact the surgery to request a phone assessment with the clinical pharmacist and/or for further information that can be sent to you by email or SMS.

Many individuals can reduce their opioid dose gradually and find that their pain is no worse. As fewer side effects are experienced, quality and enjoyment of life can improve. All of this contributes to greater physical fitness.