

How to use opioid medicines safely

Opioids are a group of medicines that can be useful for treating acute and cancer-related pain. The active ingredients that make these medicines work include morphine, oxycodone and codeine. Although these medicines can help with some types of pain, they are not very effective for most people when used for a long period of time.

When considering if opioids might be helpful for your pain, it is important to understand that these medicines can have unwanted side effects, and they can result in accidental overdose or death. Follow your doctor's advice on how to take these medicines safely.

Developing a pain management plan

Taking medicine is only one part of managing your pain. Depending on the type of pain you have (eg, acute, chronic or cancer-related), medicines won't always be able to provide total relief.

For longer-term pain in particular, taking medicines may be less about stopping the pain and more about reducing it to a level that keeps you doing your day-to-day activities.

Experience suggests that opioids work for only one in three people who take them, and when they do work they tend to reduce pain intensity by 30% to 50% at best.

Work with your doctor and other health care professionals to develop a plan to manage your pain. This might include non-medicine strategies and the use of other medicines, like paracetamol (eg, Panadol) and ibuprofen (eg, Nurofen). Make time in your plan when you and your doctor can review both the plan and your progress together.

Agreeing to a trial of opioids

Part of your pain management plan may be a trial of an opioid medicine to see if it works for your pain.

Speak to your doctor about how to manage any side effects you may experience during the trial, including nausea and vomiting, drowsiness, dizziness, headache, dry mouth, urinary retention or constipation.

Studies have shown that the risks linked to opioids become greater when opioids are taken in higher doses. These risks include slowed breathing and death. This is why opioids should not be taken with alcohol or other medicines that can make you sleepy.

Seek urgent medical attention if you experience any of these signs of an overdose: unusual sleepiness, drowsiness or difficulty staying awake despite loud shouting and shaking, mental confusion, slurred speech, slow or shallow breathing or extremely small pinpoint pupils. Advise your family and friends to be alert for these signs. They should also know that if you are asleep, making unusual loud snoring noises and can't be woken, this is an emergency and they should call an ambulance.

Why is your doctor recommending an opioid contract?

If you and your doctor think it is appropriate to trial opioid medicine for your pain, you might be asked to complete and agree to an opioid contract. This contract may be part of your pain management plan. Opioids can be addictive and they carry a risk of abuse and misuse. Your doctor will discuss these risks with you and make sure you understand and agree with what is expected of you while taking this type of medicine. These expectations will be described in the opioid contract.

Both you and your doctor are responsible

Because of the risk of harm from opioids, both you and your doctor are subject to strict regulations when an opioid medicine is prescribed.

Opioids should only be prescribed for you by one doctor and dispensed at one pharmacy and the law requires you to tell your doctor if you have recently been prescribed opioids by another doctor.

Your doctor needs this information to ensure the safe use of opioids.

When an opioid is prescribed, the law may require health professionals to provide details to the health department about your opioid treatment to ensure your safety. This information also helps coordinate treatment when other health professionals are caring for you.

How to use your medicines safely

- ▶ Always take your opioid and non-opioid pain medicines as directed by your healthcare professional.
- ▶ Do not stop your medicines without speaking to your doctor, as this may lead to withdrawal symptoms such as stomach cramps, muscle aches, anxiety, sweating and increased heart rate.
- ▶ Because opioids can make you sleepy, avoid alcohol and do not operate machinery.
- ▶ Do not share your medicines – a dose that is suitable for you can be fatal to other people, both children and adults.
- ▶ Keep your opioids in a safe, locked place, out of reach of family, children, visitors and pets.
- ▶ Always store your opioids in the original labelled container or pack.
- ▶ Return any unused medicines to your pharmacy for free and safe disposal.

Why your pain may not be getting better

Opioids are unlikely to relieve pain completely and do not have any effect in some people.

Some reasons why opioids can stop having an effect on your pain include:

- ▶ tolerance – this is a decrease in the effect of a medicine over time. Tolerance to opioids can develop within 4 weeks.
- ▶ changes in the way you experience pain – this is called central sensitisation. Opioids are less effective at treating this type of pain.
- ▶ opioid-induced hyperalgesia – this is a response to opioids that actually increases your sensitivity to pain.

Don't increase the dose of your opioid (or any medicines) without speaking to your doctor. Increasing the amount of opioid you are taking is unlikely to relieve pain and may increase your risk of adverse events, including overdose and death.

What happens if you need to stop taking opioids?

Your doctor may recommend a gradual reduction (tapering) of your medicine if it is no longer working or you are experiencing side effects. See the fact sheet 'Risks of high-dose opioid medicines' to find out more about the benefits of tapering.

You can also find a wide range of helpful information and resources at www.painaustralia.org.au.