

## Contact details

Pharmacy – 0151 430 1565

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NHS Trust

## Pharmacy Department

**0151 430 1565**

**Opioid Therapy**

**Patient Information**

**Leaflet**

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There are many types of painkillers. These are suitable for different types of pain. Usually, the first step to treat pain is to try a simple painkiller e.g. paracetamol. If this does not help, the next step is to try a moderately strong painkiller e.g. co-codamol or tramadol. If your pain is still not controlled then your doctor may prescribe a strong painkiller. The strongest painkillers used for cancer pain are called strong opioids. They can also be used for pain from other conditions.

This booklet has been given because you are being started on, or are taking, a strong opioid. The health professional who provides you with this booklet will explain the information in it.

## **Opioids**

Opioid medicines are usually used to relieve pain. They can also be used to relieve breathlessness or cough.

Common examples of strong opioids are; Buprenorphine, Diamorphine, Fentanyl, Morphine and Oxycodone

These opioids come as different brands. Not all brands are the same so once started stay with the same brand. If your opioid medicine looks different to what you have had before, discuss this with your pharmacist.

## **Further information**

Opioids in palliative care (patient version)

<http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/13745/59284/59284.doc>

"Facts about painkilling drugs". Available from MacMillan Cancer Support at:

<http://www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Livingwithandaftercancer/Symptomssideeffects/Pain/Factsaboutpainkillers.aspx>

Seek medical advice if you experience one or more of the following:

- If your pain gets worse and is not controlled by your current medication
- If you become more drowsy or sleepy than usual
- If you are being sick for more than 24 hours
- If you feel confused or not quite yourself
- If you experience hallucinations or bad dreams
- If you feel restless

### Addiction

Many people are frightened that they will get addicted to their strong painkillers. This is very unlikely when you are taking the medication for pain.

### Storage

Store your medicines in a cool, dry, safe place out of the reach of children.

### How to take opioids

You will usually be prescribed a regular opioid. The number of doses per day will depend on what you are prescribed e.g. every 12 hours for modified-release tablets / capsules. This is used to treat the pain you have all the time which is called 'background pain'.

Name of Medication \_\_\_\_\_

When to take / apply it \_\_\_\_\_

You may get pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due. This is known as 'breakthrough pain'. The duration and cause of this pain can vary from person to person. You will also be prescribed a fast-acting medicine for 'breakthrough pain'. This is for when your pain suddenly gets worse and you need something extra.

Name of Medication \_\_\_\_\_

How to take it \_\_\_\_\_

If you have pain before your next dose of regular opioid then you should take a dose of the fast acting opioid. Examples of fast acting opioids are Oramorph or OxyNorm. If you have to take more than 2 extra doses, then let your health professional know.

If you need advice or have problems out of normal hours, contact your out-of-hours GP or district nurse.

## Monitoring and prescriptions

It helps to keep a note of any 'breakthrough' doses you take. This will help your doctor/nurse to adjust your pain medication. Often patients write these in a notebook or diary which can be shown to their doctor or nurse.

## Prescriptions

Your GP or hospital doctor will provide you with a prescription for your opioid medication. Strong opioids are controlled drugs. These have legal regulations for their dispensing. The prescriptions are only valid for 28 days after the date on the prescription. No more than 30 days' supply can be prescribed.

It is important that you never run out of your medication. Ensure that you get your next prescription to your pharmacy (chemist) a few days in advance. This will ensure they have enough supply in stock. When you, or your representative, collects your medication a signature and ID may be requested.

Do not stop taking these medicines unless on the advice of a doctor or specialist nurse. Doing this could make you feel ill for a few days afterwards. This is called a withdrawal reaction. If your pain improves and you no longer require them you may be able to stop. This should only be done under the supervision of a health professional.

## Side-Effects

### Drowsiness

This should improve after a few days of starting these medicines or after a dose increase. Until this has settled down it is advisable not to drink alcohol. You should avoid driving or operating machinery.

### Sickness

Some patients may have nausea (and rarely sickness) when they first start a strong opioid. This should improve after a few days. If it does not, your doctor can prescribe anti-sickness medication.

### Constipation

This affects most people taking strong painkillers. Your doctor will usually prescribe a laxative to stop constipation being a problem. It is important to drink plenty of fluids and to take any laxatives regularly.

### Other side effects

Less common side-effects include:

- itching
- heartburn
- change in the taste of some foods
- difficulty in passing urine

If you have any of these side-effects please tell your healthcare professional.