

## Pain Management Service

# Opioids for Persistent Pain - Information for Patients

### Introduction

Medicines called opioids may be useful in helping to manage your pain. This information will help you to work with your doctor or nurse to decide if you would like to try opioids.

You can find out more about the use of opioids for persistent pain at the following website: Information for patients (Opioids Aware: Faculty of Pain Medicine) at <http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware>

### Opioid medicines to relieve pain

Opioid medicines come in many different forms, such as injections, tablets, capsules, liquids, and patches.

- Weak opioids include: codeine and dihydrocodeine.
- Strong opioid drugs include: tramadol; morphine; oxycodone; fentanyl; buprenorphine;

Opioid drugs can help manage some types of pain but not all. You should continue with regular activity and exercise, and doing things which are satisfying or enjoyable. Setting goals to improve your life is an important way to see if these drugs are helping.



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### **What about the side effects of opioids?**

When you first start the opioids side effects include:

- Dizziness, feeling sick, being sick, sleepiness, confusion.

When you take them for long periods of time these problems include:

- Constipation, itching, weight gain, lack of sex drive, difficulty breathing at night.

If you take opioid drugs for months or years it can affect your body in other ways including:

- Reduced fertility, low sex drive, irregular periods, erectile dysfunction in men (the inability to keep an erection), reduced ability to fight infection, and increased levels of pain.

### **What about work and activity?**

If you are on a regular and steady dose of opioids you should be able to live a normal life.

### **Can I drive if I am on opioids?**

New drug driving legislation came in to force in England and Wales in 2015: it remains illegal in England and Wales to drive when taking prescription medicines if the medication impairs a patient's ability to drive.

It is unsafe to drive in the first few days after starting an opioid and for a few days after dose change (up or down).

A patient on high dose morphine (around 220mg per day) could be as impaired as someone with blood alcohol around the level above which it is illegal to drive.

It remains the responsibility of all drivers, including patients, to consider whether they believe their driving may be impaired on **every occasion when they drive**.

### **Is it safe to drink alcohol when I am taking opioids?**

Alcohol and opioids together, can cause sleepiness and poor concentration.

### **Will my body get used to opioid medicines?**

Opioids can become less effective with time (tolerance). You can become dependent on opioid medicines (dependence). If you stop taking the drug suddenly, or lower the dose too quickly, you can get symptoms of withdrawal which include: tiredness, sweating, runny nose, stomach cramps, diarrhoea, aching muscles.

### **What about addiction to opioids?**

It is very rare for people in pain to become addicted to opioids. If you feel out of control, crave the drug or continue to take the drug even when it has a negative effect on your physical or mental health, discuss it with your health care professional.

### **What if I am pregnant and need opioids?**

If you take opioids during pregnancy, your baby might experience breathing difficulties at birth or symptoms of opioid withdrawal. If you are planning pregnancy, or become pregnant you should talk to your midwife or doctor **and you should not suddenly stop taking the opioids.**

### **Will I need opioids forever?**

Some people take opioids for many years. If opioids give you pain relief, you will feel that you rely on them. This is normal. If you want to try reducing your dose, you should discuss this with your doctor and bring the dose down slowly.

### **Starting opioid treatment**

Once you have made the decision to try opioids for pain relief, your health-care team will discuss with you the best way to use them to improve your quality of life. It can be helpful to write down two or three things that pain is stopping you from doing. You can then assess how much the opioids are helping you by making it easier to do these things again.

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### **Assessing opioid treatment**

Opioids don't work for everyone. If you haven't noticed any benefit after changing your dose two or three times, or if the medicines give you unpleasant side effects, you will be advised to gradually stop the drug. You should only stay on opioids if you notice a very definite improvement in your quality of life.

### **Further Information**

If you have any other questions or would like further information, please contact the Pain Control Nurses on 024 7696 5885.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 5879 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

<b>Document History</b>	
Department:	Pain management
Contact:	25884
Updated:	December 2019
Review:	December 2021
Version:	5.1
Reference:	HIC/LFT/1055/10