

Community Specialist Palliate Care Team

Strong opioids

What are strong opioids?

Strong opioids are powerful medicines used to control pain that couldn't be controlled by weaker pain medicines. There are lots of different types of opioids, including morphine, fentanyl, and oxycodone. They are available in many different forms such as tablets, capsules, syrups, patches to stick on the skin, and injections.

Why have I been prescribed strong opioids?

Strong opioids are usually used after initial treatment with painkillers, such as paracetamol, have not been effective. They are commonly given to people with severe pain and for whom pain control is difficult. They are sometimes used to reduce the feeling of breathlessness.

Will they work?

Opioids are very good medicines and can help to control pain for most people. Not all types of pain can be controlled using this type of pain relief and side effects from the medication can make it difficult to use them regularly. Sometimes you will need to take other pain relief treatments.

How do I take them?

Your healthcare team will start you on a low dose and increase the dose if necessary. You will usually be prescribed a regular opioid to treat the pain you have all the time, which is called 'background pain'. However, as you may experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due, you will also be prescribed a faster-acting medicine for this 'breakthrough pain'. This is for when your pain suddenly gets worse, and you need something extra to help manage the pain. It is difficult to know how much opioid you



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will require, and this will be reviewed regularly. If you are having side effects, you should let your doctor or nurse know.

Are there any side effects?

When you first start taking strong opioids, you may get some side effects which should reduce after a few days. Almost everyone taking morphine or oxycodone will become constipated, so it is important to regularly take a prescribed laxative. Some people experience nausea, mild drowsiness, or impaired concentration, but these are likely to be short-lived effects that settle after a few days.

Other symptoms require a prompt review by your doctor or nurse, for example, restlessness, jumpiness, bad dreams, hallucinations, and confusion. If the side effects become intolerable, your healthcare team may suggest alternative opioid drugs. You should never stop taking strong opioids suddenly as this can also give you side effects.

Are opioids addictive?

Many people are frightened that they will become addicted to their strong painkillers. There is no evidence that using strong opioids appropriately for pain or breathlessness causes addiction.

Opioids and tolerance

Tolerance is where medications become less effective with time. However, significant tolerance to strong opioids does not usually develop in palliative care. Your condition may actually be well maintained for several weeks or longer on a constant dose. Increases in dose are usually recommended because of more pain associated with worsening disease.

Does taking an opioid mean I am at the end of my life?

Strong opioids are widely used for pain control, and not just for those who are very ill at the end of their life. The right time to start strong opioids is when you have pain severe enough to need them, which hasn't been alleviated by other medications.

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Opioids and driving

The medicines you are taking do not automatically disqualify you from driving. However, it is illegal to drive if medicines are reducing your reaction time or alertness. When you start taking these medicines or the dose is increased, they can make you feel drowsy for a short time.

Do not drive unless you feel 100% safe to do so:

- after starting or increasing the dose of any drug that may make you drowsy, wait until this wears off. This usually takes around 5 days but can sometimes take longer.
- for at least 3 hours after taking a PRN dose.

If you are restarting driving it may be worth considering a short trip on familiar roads, at a quiet time, when the light is good, and with a companion who could take over driving if required.

It is advised to keep a copy of your repeat prescription in the car should you be asked to undertake a random drugs test by the police.

Who to discuss this with?

- Your doctor who can warn about which medications may affect your alertness.
- Your insurance company to be certain that you are covered to drive.
- Although you do not need to let the DVLA know that you are taking strong painkillers, in practice insurance companies will advise this. If in any doubt you can contact the DVLA medical advisory helpline.

How do I store the medication?

Medication should be securely closed in the original container with the label intact, and out of reach of children. Store safely where you or your carer can easily find them and away from direct sunlight, heat, and moisture.

How do I dispose of the medication?

Unused or unwanted medication should be returned to a community pharmacy for safe disposal. It must not be flushed down the sink or toilet or placed in the refuse bin.

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How do I get more supplies?

Please ensure you advise your healthcare team in good time, so you don't run out of medication. Dose changes may mean you need more supplies as the strength of the tablets you require may change.

Who do I contact in an emergency?

If you have any concerns please contact your GP during normal working hours, or outside of these hours, please call 111 for help and advice.

Contact details

Palliative Care Team

Available: Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm

Phone: 024 7696 4085

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, please contact 024 7696 4085 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

Did we get it right?

We would like you to tell us what you think about our services. This helps us make further improvements and recognise members of staff who provide a good service.

Have your say. Scan the QR code and on the webpage, search for Coventry Palliative Care Service or enter code 0089 to go to the feedback page for the service.



Document History

Department: Integrated Palliative Care

Updated: April 2025

Review: April 2028

Version: 1

Reference: HIC/LFT/3025/25