

# Opioids in palliative care

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This leaflet is for patients who are receiving palliative care and have been prescribed opioid medication.

## What are opioids?

Opioids are strong pain killers which can also be used to treat the symptoms of breathlessness or cough. They come in many preparations, examples are

- Morphine liquid, tablets and capsules
- Oxycodone liquid, tablets and capsules
- Fentanyl patches

## Do opioids always work for pain?

Opioids work for many people but there are some pains for which different pain killers are needed. Your doctor or specialist nurse will ask you questions to find out how well the medicine is working for you.

## How do I take opioids?

There are a number of different opioid drugs and ways of taking them, for example

- Short acting opioids such as Oramorph liquid, Sevredol tablets and oxycodone capsules should work within about 30 minutes and provide pain relief for up to four hours. You may be advised to take them regularly through the day, or to use them when you get pain despite taking long acting pain killers.
- Long acting opioids such as Zomorph capsules, MST tablets and oxycodone tablets are released into the bloodstream gradually and should be taken regularly, every 12 hours.
- Patches such as fentanyl and buprenorphine are applied to the skin and the medicine is absorbed into the blood stream.
- Opioids such as morphine and diamorphine can be given by injection and also by a syringe driver (continuous infusion under the skin) which delivers the drug continuously over 24 hours.

## What are the side effects of opioids?

Some people have side effects from opioids, the most common ones are:

- Drowsiness - this is common but often improves a few days after starting the medicine or increasing the dose. Try to persevere unless it is very severe.
- Nausea or vomiting - this occurs in less than half of patients and usually improves within a few days. It can be relieved with anti-sickness medication.
- Constipation - affects most people taking strong pain killers; you are advised to take a laxative medicine in order to relieve this. It should not be a reason to avoid pain killers.
- Less common side effects include dry mouth, itching and hallucinations. If you are worried about any of these side effects please talk to your doctor or nurse.

## Can I drive?

- You must not drive for five days after starting opioids or increasing the dose.
- After five days we advise that you drive initially in day light, for a short journey on a quiet road, and with a companion to check that you are safe.
- You must not drive for four hours after taking a dose of a short acting opioid.
- You should inform your car insurance company that you have been prescribed opioids.
- You do not need to inform the DVLA that you have been prescribed opioids but you must not drive unless you feel well enough to. If you drive when feeling drowsy, dizzy, unable to concentrate or when you have blurred vision then you are breaking the law. Remember that your driving may be affected by factors other than opioids, for example weakness due to your illness.
- A law which made it illegal to drive with certain drugs (including opioids) above specified blood levels came into force in March 2015. You will not be prosecuted as long as you are taking them as directed and your driving is not impaired. You are advised to carry a copy of your repeat prescription with you when driving so that if you are stopped by the police you can show that the drugs have been prescribed for you.

## Can I drink alcohol?

Yes - you can drink alcohol with opioids but it might make you more drowsy than usual.

## Will I become addicted to opioids?

In the palliative care setting it is very rare for people to become addicted to opioids when they are used to control pain.

If I take morphine now, does that mean it won't work when I really need it?

Morphine and other opioids will still be effective. If your pain increases over time you may need to increase the dose. Your doctor or nurse can advise you.

## Can I stop taking my opioids?

If you want to do this please talk to your doctor or nurse; it is best to reduce the dose gradually so that you don't get withdrawal effects.

## How do I store and dispose of opioids?

Keep the opioids in a safe place, out of the reach of children. Return any unused opioids to your pharmacist; do not throw them away in household waste.

## Can I take opioids abroad?

There are a few countries in the world in which all opioids are illegal so always check before you set off. For other countries, having opioids for medical reasons is allowed but you will need a medical letter stating the place and dates of travel and full details of the medicines and what they are for. You may not take more than three months' supply. If this is required, either you will need to find a doctor to visit whilst abroad or you will require a special export licence which will take time. Import and export requirements for all countries you will pass through should also be checked. Bear in mind that travel insurance will usually not cover known conditions and that healthcare abroad is rarely free. If you have any questions please speak to your doctor or nurse.

# Who can I contact if I have more questions?

If you are under the care of the Specialist Palliative Care Service use the contact numbers provided by them, otherwise contact your GP.

## Useful contact details

Macmillan Hospice Unit, Christchurch	<b>0300 019 5470</b> (7 days)
Bournemouth Hospital Palliative Care Team	<b>0300 019 6021</b>
Forest Holme Hospice, Poole...	<b>0300 019 8115</b> (7 days)
Poole Hospital Palliative Care Team	<b>0300 019 8102</b>
University Hospitals Dorset switchboard	<b>01202 303626</b>

The Royal Bournemouth Hospital, Castle Lane East, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH7 7DW  
Poole Hospital, Longfleet Road, Poole, Dorset, BH15 2JB  
Christchurch Hospital, Fairmile Road, Christchurch, Dorset, BH23 2JX

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