

Living with Strong Opioids Patient Information

Morphine and morphine-like drugs (such as oxycodone, fentanyl and buprenorphine) are the strongest painkillers available on prescription. Your doctor may refer to these medicines as “strong opioids”.

Depending on your individual circumstances these types of painkiller may be prescribed as tablets, capsules, oral liquids, a patch or an injection. They all work in similar ways and should only be used for severe pain.

Although strong opioids can be very effective in short-term (acute) pain and cancer pain, it is now recognised that they are rarely helpful in long term (chronic) pain.

If your doctor decides to prescribe a strong opioid they will discuss the risks and benefits of treatment with you. If you take strong opioids you may experience the following side effects.

- Strong opioids may make you unusually drowsy and make your breathing more slow or shallow. Very rarely these breathing problems can be life-threatening or even fatal, especially in people who have not used strong opioid painkillers before.
- Strong opioids may cause constipation and you can ask for advice on how to prevent or relieve this.
- Higher doses of strong opioids used long-term can affect many systems within the body including your immune system and hormone balance. They can even make you more sensitive to pain.
- Repeated, long term use of strong opioids may make the medicine less effective (you become ‘tolerant’ to it) or you may become dependent on it.

Your doctor will work with you to prescribe strong opioids at the lowest possible dose, for the shortest possible time. If necessary your doctor will help you to stop taking the medicines slowly and gradually, as it can cause problems if you stop taking them suddenly after taking them regularly.

Keeping your medicines safe

Strong opioid medicines are more closely regulated by law than other medicines, and you may hear them referred to as “Controlled medicines (drugs)”.

When you collect a strong opioid prescription the pharmacist will ask if the medicine is for you, or if you are collecting it for someone else. You may be asked for a form of identification like a driving licence or passport. If you have asked a family member or carer to pick up your medicine for you, they may need identification too.

You should keep your strong opioid medicine(s) out of sight and well away from children. You may want to consider keeping your medicines in a storage box or cupboard that you can lock. Your strong opioid medicine is prescribed for you. You must not let anyone else take your medicine.

Safe disposal of strong opioids

If you have strong opioids that you no longer need it is important to dispose of them safely.

- Any left-over tablets, capsules and liquid medicines (even partly used bottles) should be returned to your community pharmacy for disposal.
- Used patches should be folded in half so that the sticky side sticks to itself as soon as they are removed. This is so they do not accidentally become stuck to anyone else's skin. Used folded patches can then go in the household waste. Any unused patches should be returned to the community pharmacy.
- You should be given a sharps bin to dispose of any items used with injectable medicines (e.g. used ampoules, needles and syringes) – return the sharps bin to your community pharmacy when it is full.
- Do not give your strong opioid medicines (used or unused) to anyone else to use even if they have pain / symptoms similar to yours.

You should read the patient information leaflet provided with your medicine(s) for more detailed advice.

How will strong opioids affect my ability to drive or operate machinery?

Taking strong opioids might make you drowsy or dizzy. This can be dangerous if you drive or operate machinery. It is an offence to drive if your medicines affect your ability to drive.

- You should not drive if you feel your strong opioids are affecting your ability to drive safely, for example if you feel sleepy. Do not drive until you know how your medicines affect you.
- Make sure you take your medicine(s) according to the instructions given by the prescriber.
- When driving you should carry some evidence that you are taking strong opioids prescribed by your doctor, in case you are stopped by the police. For example, a copy of your most recent prescription.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you are not sure whether it is safe for you to drive while taking this medicine.

Strong Opioids and Alcohol

Do not drink alcohol while taking strong opioids unless you have talked to your doctor first. Strong opioids can make you drowsy or breathe more slowly, and drinking alcohol may make these effects worse.

More Information

For more information read the patient information leaflets supplied with your medicines. You may also want to visit the NHS website and search for “Controlled Drugs” or search for the name of your medicine (e.g. morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl). For example, see:

<https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/>

The Faculty of Pain also has some information for patients on their web site, see: <https://www.rcoa.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware>