



**Northumbria Healthcare**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Medicines for Patients: Strong Opioids

Issued by Pharmacy

# Treating pain with strong opioids

When treating pain, the first steps usually involve taking medication such as paracetamol. Stronger pain relief may be considered later (e.g. codeine or tramadol). If this medication doesn't work your Doctor may decide to prescribe a strong opioid, such as morphine.

This leaflet will answer some of the questions you may have about your opioid medication.

## Strong Opioids

Strong opioids are one type of strong pain relief medicine used to treat moderate to severe pain and include drugs such as morphine, oxycodone and fentanyl. This medication comes in various forms including tablets, liquid, patches and lozenges. Often strong opioids are available in two types:

- Long acting: normally taken twice a day as a regular pain medicine
- Fast acting: taken more frequently as needed for extra pain relief

The two can be used together.

The long acting opioids last about 12 hours (in some cases longer) while the fast acting opioids take around 15 -30 minutes to work and the effect lasts for around 4 hours.

The name and current dose of my slow release opioid is:

Name: .....

Dose: .....

The name and current dose of my fast acting opioid is:

Name: .....

Dose: .....

Try to record how often you need to take your fast acting medication, as this can help your Doctor decide on a dose of the long acting medication and make you feel more comfortable.

### **Side effects and toxicity**

**Constipation** – affects most patients who take strong opioids. It is important to drink plenty of fluids. Laxatives can be prescribed to prevent this problem but can take 2-3 days to work. They work better when taken regularly rather than when needed.

**Nausea** – is another common side effect and can happen when taking strong opioids for the first time or after a dose increase. This is likely to pass as your body gets used to the new medication. Anti-sickness medication may be used to help with this.

**Drowsiness** – patients can sometimes find it hard to concentrate and feel sleepy after starting strong opioids or following a dose increase. Again, this is often only a short term effect.

**Hallucinations** - Very occasionally, people who are taking strong opioids may experience hallucinations. It is very important to contact a health professional if this does occur.

**Toxicity** (unwanted effects) – when the dose of your medication is increased appropriately you should not experience toxicity. However you and your family should be aware of what may happen just in case.

- More drowsy - Small pupils - Slower breathing

Specifically for fentanyl patches - when wearing a fentanyl patch, do not use a heat pack/hot water bottle or take a hot bath as this can increase the amount of drug released increasing the risk of unwanted effects.

If you or your family recognises any of these signs, contact a Doctor as soon as possible.

## **How effective are they likely to be?**

Strong opioids are effective for certain types of pain but do not work for all pain. You may need additional medication if you are experiencing nerve pain for example.

If you find that you are experiencing side effects which are not acceptable for you or you are still experiencing pain, you must inform your doctor as changes can be made.

## **Can I still drive if I am taking opioids?**

From March 2015, new drug driving laws have been introduced in England and Wales. The law includes eight drugs commonly associated with medicinal use such as morphine.

For further information please see the Department of Transport information leaflet.

Taking strong opioids does not automatically mean you cannot drive. However they may alter the speed of your reactions, level of alertness and make you feel drowsy.

It is against the law to drive if your ability to drive is impaired by medication. **Do not drive** until you know how the medication will affect you and you feel 100% safe to do so.

You do not need to tell the DVLA about your medication unless your doctor expresses concern about your fitness to drive or your medication causes side effects likely to affect safe driving.

However you should contact your insurance company as their policies can vary.

## **For more information contact the DVLA**

Drivers Medical Enquiries:

Telephone: 0300 790 6806

Telephone lines open: Monday to Friday, 8am to 5:30pm

Telephone lines open: Saturday, 8am to 1pm

## **Can I drink alcohol?**

You can drink small amounts of alcohol (1-2 units daily) but you may find that it makes you drowsy and some people find it has a stronger effect.

## **Addiction and tolerance**

Addiction: People are sometimes worried that they may become addicted to opioids - this is not the case. If you find that you no longer need to take opioids, discuss this with your doctor and they can help reduce the dose slowly to stop.

**Tolerance:** This term is used when the body gets used to a medication at a certain dose. Generally tolerance is not a practical problem with strong opioids.

## **Fears that treatment implies the final stages of life**

Strong opioids are used to control severe pain in lots of different situations so people can go about their daily activities feeling as comfortable as possible. They are not only associated with the final stages of life.

## **Safe storage**

Strong opioids should be stored safely in a cool, dark place, well out of reach of children, vulnerable adults and pets.

## **Follow up and further prescribing**

Usually, when a strong opioid has been prescribed for the first time you will be seen frequently by your Doctor to ensure you are taking the correct dose.

The need to see your Doctor will reduce as you become established on a suitable dose. The Doctor or medical team who prescribe the medication for you will give you information about follow up appointments.

## Points of Contact

- Pain Management Team: (Tel) 01670 529 540
- North Tyneside Palliative Care Team: 0191 2934376
- Northumberland Palliative Care Team: 01670 857635
- For all other queries please contact the main switchboard: 0344 811 8111

## Sources of Information

More detailed information is available within the patient information leaflet, supplied with your medication. If you have further questions please contact your Doctor or the pharmacy team visit the wards regularly and are happy to answer any questions you or your family have about these medicines.

## **Alternative Formats**

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on **03 44 811 8118**

## **Other sources of information**

### **NHS 111**

### **NHS Choices**

[www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx)

### **NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)**

[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 01670 511098

Email: [northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk)

### **Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust**

General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

[www.northumbria.nhs.uk](http://www.northumbria.nhs.uk)

PIN 701/V2

Review date: October 2021

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