

Opioid therapy

Information and advice for patients

Palliative Care

There are many different types and strengths of painkillers suitable for different types of pain. Usually, the first step to manage pain is to try a simple pain killer like paracetamol. If this is not effective then the next step is generally a moderately strong pain killer like co-codamol or tramadol. If your pain is still not well controlled then your doctor will usually prescribe a strong pain killer. The strongest painkillers used for controlling cancer pain or pain associated with progressive disease are called strong opioids.

This booklet has been given to you because you are either being started on, or are already taking a medicine known as a strong opioid. The healthcare professional who provides you with this booklet will explain the information contained in it.

Opioids

Opioid medicines are commonly used to relieve pain and can also be used to relieve breathlessness or cough.

Common examples of strong opioids are;

- Buprenorphine, Diamorphine, Fentanyl
- Morphine, Oxycodone

These opioids come as different brands and not all brands are the same. Therefore, once you have started on one brand it is recommended that you stick to that brand. If you notice that the opioid medicines you have been given looks different in anyway to what you have previously received please discuss this with your pharmacist.

How to take opioids

You will usually be prescribed a regular opioid for which the frequency will differ depending on what you are prescribed, e.g. every 12 hours for modified-release tablets / capsules. This is used to treat the pain you have all the time which is called 'background pain'.

Name of Medication _____

When to take / apply it _____

However, you may experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due. This is known as 'breakthrough pain'. The duration and cause of this pain will differ from person to person. You will also be prescribed a faster acting medicine for 'breakthrough pain'. This is for when your pain suddenly gets worse and you need something extra.

Name of Medication _____

How to take it _____

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If you experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due then you should take an additional dose of quick acting opioid that you have been prescribed. Examples of these quick acting opioids are Oramorph or Oxynorm. If you find you are having to take a lot of additional doses, let your healthcare professional know.

Monitoring and prescriptions

It is helpful to make a note of the amount of 'breakthrough' doses you are having to take as it helps your doctor/nurse to adjust your pain medication more accurately. Often patients write these down in a notebook or diary which they can then show to their doctor or nurse.

Prescriptions

Your GP or your hospital doctor will provide you with prescriptions for your opioid medication. Strong opioids are controlled drugs for which there are certain regulations with regards to their dispensing. These prescriptions are only valid for 28 days after the date on the prescription and only up to 30 days can be prescribed and issued to you.

It is very important that you never run out of your medication and ensure that you get your next prescription to your community pharmacy a few days in advance to ensure they have adequate supply in stock. When you or a representative collect your medication a signature and identification may be requested.

You should not stop taking these drugs unless on the advice of a doctor or specialist nurse as this would be likely to make you feel ill for a few days afterwards. This is called a withdrawal reaction. If your pain improves and you no longer require them you may be able to stop them. This should only be done under the supervision of a healthcare professional.

If you need advice or have problems out of normal hours contact your out of hours GP or district nurse.

Side-Effects

Drowsiness

This should improve after a few days of taking these drugs or after a dose increase. Until this has settled down it is advisable not to drink alcohol and to avoid driving or operating machinery.

Sickness

Some patients may experience nausea (and rarely sickness) when they first start a strong opioid. This should improve by itself after a few days but if it becomes problematic your doctor will be able to prescribe you some anti-sickness medication.

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Constipation

This affects most people taking strong painkillers and the doctor will usually prescribe a laxative for you to take to prevent constipation becoming a problem. It is important to drink plenty of fluids and take any laxatives regularly that are prescribed to you by your doctor.

Others

Other less common side-effects include itching, heartburn, change in taste of some foods and a difficulty in passing urine. If you experience any of these side-effects please tell your healthcare professional.

When to seek medical advice

Seek medical advice if you experience one or more of the following;

- If your pain gets worse and is not controlled by your current medication
- If you become more drowsy or sleepy than usual
- If you are being sick for more than 24 hours
- If you feel confused or not quite yourself
- If you experience hallucinations or bad dreams
- If you feel restless.

Addiction

Many people are frightened that they will become addicted to their strong painkillers. This is extremely unlikely to happen whilst you are taking the medication for pain.

Storage

Store your medicines in a cool, dry, safe place out of the reach of children.

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Further information

Please refer to the Patient Information Leaflet provided with your medication.

National Institute of Health and Care Excellence

Opioids in palliative care (patient version)

<http://www.nice.org.uk/Inicemedia/live/13745/59284/59284.doc>

MacMillan Cancer Support

Facts about painkilling drugs

Website: <http://www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Livingwithandaftercancer/Symptomssideeffects/Pain/Factsaboutpainkillers.aspx>

This leaflet has been adapted from NHS Wales 'Opioid Therapy' with permission.

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5495 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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