



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Reducing and stopping opioids

Information for patients



Why stop taking opioids?

Opioids like **morphine**, **oxycodone** or **fentanyl** are very good painkillers for short-term pain after surgery or after an accident (such as a broken bone). This is known as **acute pain** and lasts days or weeks.

It used to be thought that opioids were also useful for people with longer-lasting pain. This is known as **chronic pain** and goes on for months or years. We now know that opioids don't help long-term pain and, more importantly, are not safe to take for longer periods of time. Doing this can cause side effects, addiction or early death.

Oxycodone and fentanyl are stronger drugs than morphine. If you are taking these drugs as tablets or using patches, we can work out how much the same dose would be in morphine. We call this the 'morphine equivalent' dose.

The British Pain Society recommends that people with chronic pain should take no more than **120mg of morphine equivalent a day**. This includes all opioid tablets, capsules or liquids you take or patches you use.

In fact, research from the USA shows that people who take more than 100mg of morphine equivalent per day have an increased risk of death (from overdose or side effects), compared to people who take no opioids or a very small dose.

Side effects of opioids

- **Constipation and nausea (feeling sick)**
- **Daytime sleepiness, poor concentration and poor memory**
- **Problems sleeping at night, including snoring or difficulty breathing**

- **Effects on hormones**, particularly low testosterone levels (women have testosterone too, but in smaller amounts).

This may result in reduced fertility (making it more difficult to get pregnant), low sex drive, irregular periods, difficulty having sex, feeling tired, hot flushes, depression and osteoporosis (thinning of the bones).

- **Effects on your immune system**

This can make it more difficult to fight infection.

- **Opioid-induced hypersensitivity**

If you take opioids for a long time, they can start to make you **more** sensitive to pain. You may notice that sometimes a simple touch, like clothes rubbing on your skin, can feel painful, while something that you'd expect to hurt a bit can feel extremely painful. So, rather than help reduce pain, the opioids start to make your pain system more sensitive.

Stopping opioids completely will reverse this effect, so you may find that your pain gets better once you've stopped taking opioids.

Tolerance, dependence and addiction

Tolerance is when opioids become less effective over time, as your body has got used to the pain-relieving effect.

Your body can also become **dependent** on opioids, so that if you stop taking them suddenly you get symptoms of withdrawal.

Occasionally people in pain can become **addicted** to opioids. This can cause you to feel out of control about how much medicine you take or how often you take it. You might crave the medicine, or carry on taking it even when it has a negative effect on your physical or mental health.

Driving and opioids

In March 2015, a new **drug driving law** was introduced. It introduced a limit for **morphine** (as well as other drugs), above which you shouldn't drive. The maximum blood level is 80mcg/l, which is approximately **200mg of morphine equivalent a day**.

Tests showed that people with blood levels of morphine above this can have slower reaction times and decision times, leading to problems judging distance and their own speed. Driving ability gets even worse if you are also taking other drugs that make you feel sleepy, like diazepam, amitriptyline or gabapentin, among others.

Other drugs, like codeine or tramadol, or some over the counter medication from your pharmacy, can also affect your ability to drive safely by making you feel sleepy, or have difficulty concentrating.

Whatever drugs you are taking, you must never drive if you don't feel safe to do so.

What can help me while I'm reducing my opioids?

We shall use a plan that reduces your opioid doses slowly. This will help to reduce the chance of you developing feelings of withdrawal or, if you do, they will be mild.

You may find you are more irritable than usual, or may feel more anxious or depressed. If this becomes a problem, speak with your GP about Talking Therapies or changes to your other, non-opioid medication.

As you reduce your opioids you may experience withdrawal symptoms, such as feeling shivery or sweaty, diarrhoea, or stomach cramps. Occasionally pain may worsen for a short while. These symptoms shouldn't last long and we suggest that you use distraction or relaxation techniques to help during this time. Music, books or films can be useful for distraction, as well as getting out and keeping active, even if it is just walking.

There is a Headspace app which can also help with relaxation (see next section). Having nice snacks or drinks may help if you lose your appetite, and also can stop you from becoming dehydrated.

The most important thing you will need is support from family and friends, who should understand that this is an important but possibly difficult thing for you to do. Even after you stop all of your opioids it can take 4-6 months to feel back to normal, so you will still need their support during this time.

The following section has a list of useful resources that may help you manage during reduction of your opioid medicine.

Useful resources

There are many resources which can help you understand and manage your pain listed on the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust website.

www.ouh.nhs.uk/services/departments/pain-management

Some are also listed here:

The Pain Toolkit

This gives practical advice and techniques to help manage pain.

Website: www.paintoolkit.org

Hunter Integrated Pain Service (Australia)

An excellent five minute overview of chronic pain.

Website: www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KrUL8tOaQs

“Brainman stops his opioids”

Website: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI1myFQPdCE

Another good explanation of **how your mood can affect pain**.

Website: www.tamethebeast.org

Videos about chronic pain and how to manage it

Chronic pain – www.healthtalk.org

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

Website: www.csp.org.uk/publications/10-things-you-need-know-about-your-back

A very good video about back pain: <https://youtu.be/24P7cTQjsVM>

World Health Organisation (WHO) animated videos

Depression: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc

Stress: www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6402QJp52M

Apps:

Mindfulness: www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app

Active walking: www.nhs.uk/oneyou/active10/home#xfEeV0FM3W4Xo5gM.97

Mood diary: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/wellmind/id918138339?mt=8>

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