



Pain Medication

What you need to know about opioid analgesics



Centre universitaire de santé McGill
McGill University Health Centre

*Les meilleurs soins pour la vie
The Best Care for Life*

Pain Medication

What you need to know about opioid analgesics

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Important :

This booklet is created for patient education only and does not replace advice and directions of health care professionals who are responsible for your care. Contact them if you have questions about your situation.

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1 Introduction

This booklet provides information on the use of opioid analgesic medications that are prescribed for acute or chronic pain. The booklet will help you and your family understand how to safely use these pain medications upon leaving the hospital and when at home.



2 What you need to know about pain

Pain is an unpleasant sensation that happens after surgery, an accident or due to an illness. Pain is personal and can only be explained by the person who suffers from it. Pain can be acute or chronic.

Acute pain: It is short in duration and is caused by an illness, an injury or surgery. Acute pain decreases when an injury or an illness heals. When pain is acute, we use medication against pain called analgesics to manage it. Pain that is not controlled can interfere with your recovery and return to normal activities.

Chronic pain: It is constant, present for more than 3 months. It may be caused by chronic illnesses such as arthritis, cancer or other health problems. This type of pain often requires regular (around the clock) treatment to help you maintain your activities.



3 How to relieve pain?

In most cases, medication is prescribed to ease pain. There are many types of medication that can be used alone or in combination with one another. Some examples are: Acetaminophen, anti-inflammatory drugs, and opioid analgesics among others. In the case of continual pain, these medications may be prescribed for you at regular hours, depending on the type and severity of your pain.

The intensity of your pain is often measured on a numeric scale from 0 to 10 with **0 = no pain** and **10 = Pain as bad as you can imagine**.

Pain Intensity Scale



4 What is an opioid medication?

Opioid medication is an analgesic that acts against the pain. This medication blocks the sensation of pain at the level of the nervous system. The effect of this type of medication can be either for short duration (3 to 4 hours) or for long duration (12 to 24 hours).

There are many kinds of opioid medications. Here are some examples:



Short action

Codeine, Empracet
Hydromorphone,
Dilaudid, Morphine,
Statex, Oxycodone,
Supeudol, Tramadol

Long action

Codeine Contin,
MS Contin, M-Eslon,
Hydromorph Contin,
Oxycontin/OxyNEO,
Duragesic, Ratio-Fentanyl,
ZytramXL, Ralivia, Tridural

5 How to take these medications?

- It is very important to closely follow the prescription and the instructions of your doctor when taking opioid medication.
- If your pain becomes worse, **never increase** the dose without first talking to your doctor or nurse.
- Most opioid medications are prescribed as pills or a liquid to be taken by mouth. They can also be prescribed as a suppository to be inserted in the rectum or as a patch that can be placed on the skin.
- The pills should be swallowed whole and must not be broken, crushed or chewed except on the advice of your doctor or pharmacist.
- Never stop taking your medication abruptly without talking to your doctor or nurse.

Talk to your pharmacist and ask for written advice on how to use and keep your medication at home. Ask your pharmacist to print a list of your medications for you.

6 What precautions do you need to take?

- Always inform your healthcare professionals of the medication(s) you are taking when you go for a test or treatment.
- Tell your doctor about other medications or herbal remedies you are taking, especially those that can make you feel sleepy: Medications for sleep (sleeping pills), for allergies, against nausea and vomiting, against anxiety and muscle relaxants.

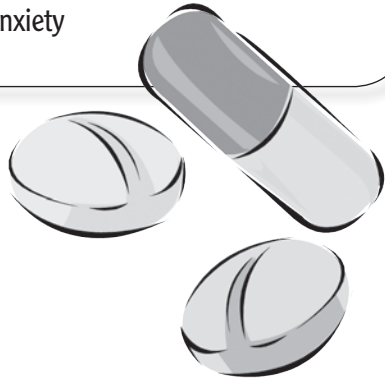


- Ask your pharmacist for information on medications that you can take without a prescription because some can change the effect of the pain medication.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.
- Avoid driving your car or operating machinery for the first 48 hours or until your dose of medication is stable. Never drive if you feel dizzy.

It is **strongly advised** that a relative or friend stay with you at home for the first 24 hours after you start taking an opioid analgesic.

**Classes of medications
that can increase drowsiness (feeling sleepy)
if taken with opioids:**

- Medication for depression
- Medication for epilepsy
- Medication for heart rate and rhythm
- Muscle relaxants
- Medication for allergies
- Medication for nausea or feeling
“sick to your stomach”
- Medication for sleep
- Medication for anxiety



7 What are the side effects and what can you do?

Some side effects of opioid analgesics can appear at the beginning of the treatment and go away when your body gets used to the medications (1 to 3 days). The most common are:

- Constipation
- Dizziness
- Nausea or feeling “sick to your stomach” and vomiting
- Drowsiness (feeling sleepy)
- Skin redness or itching
- Difficulty urinating
- Moist and cold skin or sweating
- Slow or shallow breathing

Other side effects are very rare and you should contact your doctor immediately if you experience them:

- Blurred vision
- Hallucinations (when a person can see and hear things that don’t exist for others)
- Confusion

ALLERGIC REACTIONS

Allergic reactions to opioids are rare. If you have one of the following symptoms, stop the medication and call 911:

- **Swelling in the face (eyes, mouth)**
- **Tightness in the throat**
- **Difficulty breathing**

Let your doctor or nurse know if you are experiencing any side effects.

Do not stop the treatment without asking their advice first.

Side effect	What to do?
<p>Drowsiness (feeling sleepy): Appears at the beginning of the treatment or when the dose is increased, but should go away within 72 hours (3 days).</p> <p>SEVERE DROWSINESS Your sleep becomes very deep and you cannot be woken up.</p>	<p>Relax, take a nap and do not drive or operate machinery.</p> <p>In the case of severe drowsiness, the person close to you should call 911 and continue trying to stimulate you (keep you awake) while waiting for help.</p>
<p>Dizziness: Feeling that your head is spinning.</p>	<p>Try to move slowly. Avoid falling. Ask someone to stay with you.</p>
<p>Nausea or feeling sick to your stomach and vomiting</p>	<p>Notify your doctor to see if a medication against nausea should be prescribed.</p>
<p>Dry mouth</p>	<p>Drink water or suck on an ice cube.</p>
<p>Constipation: Absence or difficulty having bowel movements (not being able to go to the toilet).</p>	<p>Drink a lot of water (8 to 10 glasses per day) and prune juice.</p> <p>Ask your doctor to prescribe you medication for constipation. You should use it while you are taking analgesic opioids.</p> <p>Avoid Psyllium (Metamucil)</p>
<p>Skin redness, itching</p>	<p>Take oatmeal baths or use calamine lotion. Talk to your doctor if it does not go away.</p>

8 What are the risk factors for severe drowsiness?

Some people are more at risk of having severe drowsiness while taking opioids.

These people are:

- Children less than 12 months old
- Older adults over 70 years old
- People who have respiratory problems like sleep apnea (when a person stops breathing for short times during the night or day and appears to be asleep), or who have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- People with kidney problems
- People with liver problems
- People with a neuromuscular or neurological illness
- People who are obese
- People with a recent head injury
- People who take medications that can cause drowsiness (see page 7)

If you have one or more of these risk factors, let your doctor know. The doctor may choose to start with doses that are smaller than usual.

Be careful and closely follow the instructions of your doctor and your pharmacist.

9 Questions and answers

Will I become addicted to these drugs?

Many people believe that if they take morphine for pain they will develop an addiction similar to drug addicts. In fact, it is very rare. It is more of a physical dependence that will disappear if the medication is stopped gradually.

If I take morphine, does this mean that I am dying?

No, morphine is prescribed for all kinds of pain. It is an effective medication to ease the pain, to help you return to normal activities and to prevent the complications of staying immobile for a long time.

Is it better not to take medication so that I don't have side effects?

No, most medication can cause side effects. You should know them and talk about them with a health care provider. For opioids, most of the side effects can be prevented and controlled.

What do I do if I miss a dose?

If you have pain, take your usual dose of opioid and take the next dose at the prescribed interval specified on your bottle. Talk to your pharmacist for more information.

10 Definitions

Addiction: Chronic neuro-biological illness and psychological dependence on the medication. It is characterized by:

- Loss of control related to the use of opioids
- Compulsive use
- Continued use despite the harm that it causes
- Cravings

Physical dependence: State in which your body is used to the medication. If you stop taking it abruptly you will have withdrawal symptoms. This does not mean that you are an addict.

Tolerance: State in which the dose of medication has to be increased with time to get relief. This does not mean that you are an addict.

Analgesic: A medication (drug) that reduces or eliminates pain

Immobile: Not moving or unable to move.

Nausea: Upset stomach and feel an urge to vomit.

Prescription: A written order for a medication (drug), preparation or treatment, which tells you how much and how often to take it.

Withdrawal: Symptoms that occur when a medication (drug) is stopped all at once. Examples of symptoms are nausea, sweating and headache.

For questions and problems contact:

MUHC: 514-934-1934

Extension: _____

Info-santé

Call info santé at 811 to talk to a nurse

Or your local pharmacist.

Sites and resources to view:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca

Toll free number: 1-866 225-0709

www.canadianpainsociety.ca

www.canadianpaincoalition.ca

www.douleurchronique.ca

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Pain Diary

Date YYYY/MM/DD	Time 00 : 00	Where does it hurt?	Pain intensity rating (0 - 10)	What were you doing?	Did you take your analgesic? Yes / No	Pain intensity rating after 1-2 hrs? (0 - 10)	Comments? Side effects?



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IMPORTANT : PLEASE READ

Information provided in this pamphlet is for educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice or instruction of a professional healthcare practitioner, or to substitute medical care. Contact a qualified healthcare practitioner if you have any questions concerning your care.