



Information for
patients and
carers

Reducing and stopping opioids

**What help and support can we give you to
optimise your opioid dose?**

Why stop taking opioids?

Opioids like Morphine, Oxycodone and Fentanyl are very good pain medications in the short term, for acute pain following surgery or an injury such as a broken bone. These acute pains tend to last days or weeks.

It used to be thought that opioid pain medications were also useful for people with persistent, long lasting, chronic pain. Persistent pain often lasts for months or years. We now know that opioids do not help with long term, persistent pain; and more importantly, are not safe to take over for long periods of time. Taking opioids long term can cause harmful side effects, such as addiction or early death.

Oxycodone and Fentanyl are stronger opioids than Morphine. If you are taking these drugs as tablets or using patches, we can work out how much the same dose would be using Morphine. This is known as the 'Morphine equivalent' dose.

The Faculty of Pain Medicine recommends that people with persistent pain should take no more than 120mg of Morphine equivalent a day (MED). This includes all opioid tablets, capsules or liquids you take or patches you use daily. There is no evidence that by taking high dose opioids long term there is an increase in pain relief, however, there is evidence that taking high dose opioids causes harm.

Research from the USA has shown 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 effect of opioids

- **Constipation**
- **Nausea** (feeling sick)
- **Daytime sleepiness**
- **Poor concentration**

- **Poor memory**
- **Problems sleeping at night**, including snoring or difficulty breathing or a change in your sleeping habits
- **Effect on hormones**, particularly low testosterone levels (women have testosterone, 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 would expect to hurt a bit can feel extremely painful. So, rather than help reduce your pain, the opioids start to make your pain system more sensitive. Stopping opioids completely will reverse this effect, so you may find your pain gets better once you have 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 pain 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

Tests showed that people with blood levels of Morphine above 220mg of morphine a day they are likely to have a blood level of the medicine which impairs them nearly as much as someone who is over the legal limit of alcohol. This can cause slower reaction 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, such as Diazepam, Amitriptyline or Gabapentin. Other drugs, like Codeine or Tramadol, or some over the counter medication from your pharmacy, can also affect your ability to drive safely.

In March 2015, a new **drug driving law** was introduced. It introduced a limit for **Morphine** (as well as other drugs), above which you should not drive. **Whatever drugs you are taking, you must never drive if you do not feel safe to do so.**

What can help me while I am 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 / Consultant 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 become worse for a short while. These symptoms should not last long and we suggest that you use distraction or relaxation techniques to help during this time. Music, books or films can be a useful distraction, as well as getting out and keeping active, even if it is just a short walk.

There are mindfulness apps which can also help with relaxation. Having nice snacks or drinks may help if you lose your appetite and can also stop you becoming dehydrated.

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

Useful resources

The Pain Toolkit: www.paintoolkit.org/

Opioids aware: www.fpm.ac.uk/opioids-aware/information-patients

Brainman stops his opioids:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ml1myFQPdCE

Be Mindful: is an online 10-session course for reducing stress, depression and anxiety. It guides you through the elements of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). NHS approved; cost £30

The Sleep Charity: sleepcharity.org.uk

Catch it: Learn how to manage feelings like anxiety and depression with Catch It. This app will teach you how to look at problems in a different way, turn negative thoughts into positive ones and improve your mental wellbeing. NHS approved and FREE.

Contact details

Should you require further advice or information please contact the Pain Management Service; phone 01772 524185.

Sources of further information

www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk

www.nhs.uk

www.accessable.co.uk

www.gov.uk/drug-driving-law

fpm.ac.uk/sites/fpm/files/documents/2019-08/FPM-Driving-and-Pain-patient-information.pdf

All our patient information leaflets are available on our website for patients to access and download:

www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets

Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is not responsible for the content of external internet sites.

Lancashire Teaching Hospitals is a smoke-free site. Smoking is not permitted anywhere on any of our premises, either inside or outside the buildings. Our staff will ask you about your smoking status when you come to hospital and will offer you support and advice about stopping smoking this will include Nicotine Replacement Therapy to help manage your symptoms of withdrawal and the opportunity to speak to a nurse or advisor from the specialist Tobacco and Alcohol Care Team.

If you want to stop smoking you can also contact the Quit Squad Freephone 0800 328 6297.

Please ask if you would like help in understanding this information. This information can be made available in large print and in other languages.

Gujarati:

આ માહિતીને સમજવામાં સહાયતા જોઈતી હોય તો કૃપા કરીને પૂછો. આ માહિતી મોટા છપાણ માં અને અન્ય ભાષામાં ઉપલબ્ધ કરી શકાય છે.

Romanian:

Vă rugăm să întrebați dacă aveți nevoie de ajutor pentru înțelegerea acestor informații. Aceste informații pot fi puse la dispoziție în format mare și în alte limbi.”

Polish:

Poinformuj nas, jeśli potrzebna jest ci pomoc w zrozumieniu tych informacji. Informacje te można również udostępnić dużym drukiem oraz w innych językach

Punjabi:

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਸਮਝਣ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਮਦਦ ਲੈਣੀ ਚਾਹੋਗੇ ਤਾਂ ਕਰਿਯਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਇਸ ਬਾਰੇ ਪੁੱਛੋ। ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਵੱਡੇ ਪ੍ਰਿੰਟ ਅਤੇ ਹੋਰਨਾਂ ਭਾਸ਼ਾਵਾਂ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਮੁਹੱਈਆ ਕੀਤੀ ਜਾ ਸਕਦੀ ਹੈ।

Urdu:

دو سر ی زبانوں او ر بڑی اگر آپ کو ہی معلومات سمجھنے کے لیے مدد کی ضرورت ہے تو ییچھپیا یں ییہ ابی دست ہو یسکت ہے براے مہر یبان پوے یچھہی۔ معلومات

Arabic:

مطبوعة بأحرف كبيرة و بلغات إذا كنت تريد مساعدة في فهم هذه المعلومات يرجى أن تطلب أخرى يمكن توفير هذه المعلومات

Department: Pain Management Service
Division: Diagnostics and Clinical Support
Production date: March 2022
Review date: March 2025
JR 768 v1