

# Managing your pain safely with opioids

Opioids (eg, morphine and oxycodone) are medicines that may be prescribed to treat severe acute pain or cancer pain. However opioids are not universal painkillers, and they are often not very effective for chronic pain that is not caused by cancer.

The use of opioids for more than 3 months is linked with potentially serious harms, from both opioid-related side effects (such as constipation and nausea), and an increased risk of accidental fatal overdose, dependence or addiction.

## Using opioids for pain management

If you have pain your doctor may have prescribed an opioid. Your doctor has balanced the benefits and risks of using an opioid, based on an assessment of your pain and previous drug use. If you have a prior history of opioid dependence, for your own safety you should always:

- ▶ be truthful about your health and prior drug and alcohol history
- ▶ provide as much information as you can to describe your pain.

This will help your doctor provide the best possible pain management, and together you can make a pain management plan that includes non-medicine strategies (such as physiotherapy or acupuncture) and other non-opioid medicines (such as paracetamol).

## How to get the best care

If you are prescribed an opioid, your doctor will work with you to protect your safety. As well as a pain management plan, this may involve:

- ▶ referral to specialists
- ▶ an opioid treatment plan that includes details of your prescription, agreements you have made such as not using street drugs and not misusing, injecting, selling, losing or sharing your opioid medicine, and also any changes to treatment
- ▶ urine tests and other ways to make sure you are using your medicines safely

- ▶ checking your history of previous treatment with other doctors.

## How to avoid opioid misuse

Opioids are usually safe when used correctly and as your doctor prescribes, but when misused or taken illegally, they can be harmful. There are additional risks if you are misusing drugs or have previously had a problem with drug misuse. In this case special care is needed for your safety.

Opioid misuse/abuse occurs when you:

- ▶ use the drug without your doctor's consent
- ▶ visit many doctors asking for a prescription
- ▶ use someone else's drugs
- ▶ take a larger dose than you were prescribed
- ▶ take your opioids in a different way than they were prescribed.

Always take your medicines as directed, have one doctor and one pharmacy, keep all your appointments and follow your pain management plan.

## Important things to know

- ▶ You may be asked to agree to an opioid treatment plan (also known as a care plan or an opioid contract). This is to make sure you are using the medicine safely.
- ▶ Your doctor may decide to stop your opioid treatment if you have not kept to your agreement and she or he is concerned about your safety.

- ▶ If you are stopping your opioid treatment, you will be asked to slowly decrease your use of opioids; this is called tapering. It is important that you follow the tapering schedule you agree with your doctor. This will help minimise or reduce the chance of withdrawal symptoms such as stomach cramps, muscle cramps, anxiety, sweats and increased heart rate.
- ▶ If you have severe, increased or new pain, don't just take more of your opioid or other pain relieving medicines. Taking more of a medicine may have no effect on your pain, but will increase the chance of unwanted side effects. Contact your doctor to talk about your options.
- ▶ Don't let any other people take or use your opioids, and don't sell or give away your opioids. This is dangerous and illegal.
- ▶ If you lose your opioids or prescriptions or someone else takes them without your permission, your doctor may decide that the risk to others is too high and you may be required to pick up your medicines every day or two, or decide to stop prescribing them and taper you off them.
- ▶ Keep your opioids in a safe, locked place, out of reach of family, children, visitors and pets. Always store your opioids in the original labelled container or pack.
- ▶ Tell all your healthcare providers that you are currently taking prescribed opioids.
- ▶ Don't stop taking opioids without talking to your doctor. If you stop taking opioids suddenly, you may have withdrawal symptoms.

## There are effective treatments for opioid dependence

There are treatments for opioid dependence that involve medicines such as methadone, buprenorphine and naltrexone. Speak to your doctor to find out more about treatment programs for drug dependence or call DirectLine (Tel: 1800 888 236). A doctor who is experienced in drug treatment or a drug counsellor can explain the process.

## Already being treated for opioid dependence?

If you are taking part in a drug dependence program and need pain management you should tell the doctor treating your dependency about your pain. The doctor may refer you to a pain or addiction specialist or clinic.

Non-opioid medicine and non-medicine strategies may be enough for most pain but your doctor will advise you on what to do if an opioid is needed to manage your pain.

Your usual dose of methadone, buprenorphine or naltrexone may need to continue or be modified.

## Where to get help

DirectLine is a free, confidential alcohol and drug counselling and referral service available 24 hours, 7 days a week. Contact Direct Line on 1800 888 236 or visit [www.directline.org.au](http://www.directline.org.au).

You can also find a wide range of helpful information and resources at [www.painaustralia.org.au](http://www.painaustralia.org.au).