

# Strong opioids

## Information for patients

### Can I still drive?

Strong opioids do not automatically disqualify you from driving in the UK if the following applies:

- They have been prescribed to treat a medical or dental problem;
- You have taken them according to the instructions given by your doctor or dentist, or the information provided with the medicine;
- They are not affecting your ability to drive safely.

Opioids can affect your reaction speed and general alertness. If you plan to drive please inform your doctor and your insurance company. Do not drive unless you feel 100% safe to do so.

After starting or increasing the dose of a strong painkiller it is advisable not to drive for at least five days, or until you know how it affects you.

### How do I store the medication?

Medication should be securely closed in the original container with the label intact, and out of reach of children. Store safely where you or your carer can easily find them and away from direct sunlight, heat and moisture.

### How do I dispose of the medication?

Unused or unwanted medication should be returned to a community pharmacy for safe disposal.

It must not be flushed down the sink or toilet, or placed in the refuse bin.

### How do I get more supplies?

Please ensure you advise your healthcare team in good time so you don't run out of medication.

Dose changes may mean you need more supplies as the strength of tablets you require may change.

### Who do I contact in an emergency?

If you have any concerns please contact your GP during normal working hours, or outside of these hours, please call **111 for help and advice**.

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## What are strong opioids?

Strong opioids are powerful medicines used to control pain that has not been controlled by weaker pain medicines. There are lots of different types of opioids, including morphine, fentanyl and oxycodone. They are available in many different forms such as tablets, capsules, syrups, patches to stick on the skin, and injections.

## Why have I been prescribed strong opioids?

Strong opioids are usually used after initial treatment with painkillers, such as paracetamol, has not been effective. They are commonly given to people with severe pain and for whom pain control is difficult. They are sometimes used to reduce the feeling of breathlessness.

## Will they work?

Opioids are very good medicines and can help most people to control their pain. Not all types of pain can be controlled using this type of pain relief and side effects from the medication can make it difficult to use them regularly. Sometimes you will need to take other pain relief treatments.

## How do I take them?

Your healthcare team will start you on a low dose and increase the dose if necessary. You will usually be prescribed a regular opioid to treat the pain you have all the time, which is called 'background pain'. However, as you may experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due, you will also be prescribed a faster acting medicine for this 'breakthrough pain'. This is for when your pain suddenly gets worse and you need something extra. It is difficult to know how much opioid you will require and this will be reviewed regularly. If you are having side effects you should let your doctor or nurse know.

## Are there any side effects?

When you first start taking strong opioids you may get some side effects which should reduce after a few days. Almost everyone taking morphine or oxycodone will become constipated so it is important to regularly take a prescribed laxative. Some people experience nausea, mild drowsiness or impaired concentration, but these are likely to be short lived effects which settle after a few days. Other symptoms require a prompt review by your doctor or nurse, for example restlessness, jumpiness, bad dreams, hallucinations and confusion. If the side effects become intolerable your healthcare team may suggest alternative opioid drugs. You should never stop taking strong opioids suddenly as this can also give you side effects.

## Are opioids addictive?

Many people are frightened that they will become addicted to their strong painkillers. There is no evidence that using strong opioids appropriately for pain or breathlessness causes addiction.

## Opioids and tolerance

Tolerance is where medications become less effective with time. However, significant tolerance to strong opioids does not usually develop in palliative care. Your condition may actually be well maintained for several weeks or longer on a constant dose. Increases in dose are usually recommended because of more pain associated with worsening disease.

## Does taking opioids mean I am at the end of my life?

Strong opioids are widely used for pain control, and not just for those who are very ill at the end of their life. The right time to start strong opioids is when you have pain severe enough to need them, and which hasn't been alleviated by other medications.

