

Understanding Morphine and other Opioid Medicines

Opioid medicines are pain relievers. They include codeine, morphine and oxycodone. This information is a guide to help you, and your carers, use these medicines to relieve pain. Knowing the facts will help you manage your pain and help to improve the quality of your life.

What is morphine?

Morphine is a type of opioid medicine that works very well to relieve many types of pain. Although it is most commonly used for pain, it can also be used to control feelings of breathlessness.

How do I take opioid medicines?

Opioid medicines can be given in several ways:

- Short-acting tablets or syrups, which provide pain relief for up to four hours.
- Long-acting tablets or capsules that are effective for 12 hours, so you only need to take them twice a day.

Commonly, a combination of both short and long-acting opioid medicines is required to manage pain. Some opioid medicines are available as injections too, if needed.

What happens when I start taking opioid medicine?

You will begin on the lowest suitable dose for your pain. The level of your pain should improve quickly, although it may take several days to a week, to find the correct dose. As your illness progresses, you may need to increase the dose but, usually, this happens because the pain is increasing. It does not mean that the opioid is losing its effect.

What are the main side effects to look for?

The side effects of opioid medicines are manageable. The most commonly experienced are:

- Constipation – opioid medicines slow down bowel activity so most people who take opioids, need to take laxatives also.
- Nausea – opioid medicines can make you feel sick when you first take them. Your doctor may give you something to stop this feeling but, usually, it lasts only a few days.
- Drowsiness – opioid medicines can make you feel sleepy for the first few days while you are getting used to them, or when the dose is increased, but your body will gradually adapt.

If you have other side effects, note these down and tell your doctor what they are, and when they occur. Your doctor may be able to help by changing the dose or the medicine.





What about my day-to-day activities if I am taking opioid medication?

Most people find they can carry on doing the things they want to do when taking opioid medicine. In fact, many people find they can do more because their pain is better controlled. Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist will advise you about driving and other activities.

If I take an opioid medicine will I become addicted to it?

When your doctor works with you to establish the right dose of opioids for your pain, you will not become addicted. Addiction occurs only when people misuse opioid medicines and take them without medical supervision.

The sooner you share information about your pain, the more manageable it is likely to be.

Will opioid medicines stop me from knowing how my illness is progressing?

Some people stop taking their pain medicines because they are worried the medicines will 'cover up' the progression of their illness and they won't know what is happening with their underlying condition. Pain medicines will not stop your doctor monitoring the progress of your illness because they have other ways of doing this.

If I take opioid medicine for pain, why do I need other painkillers?

Although opioid medicines work well on many types of pain, some sorts of pain need different pain-relieving medicines and so you may need to take several different types of medicines to manage your pain.

Can I use Complementary Medicines when I am taking opioid medicines?

It is important to tell your doctor or nurse about all other medicines, vitamins, herbs or supplements that you are taking. This will give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health and will ensure that you receive coordinated and safe care.

More questions?

If you have any further questions about morphine or other opioid medicines, please ask your nurse, doctor or pharmacist. Visit www.healthnavigator.org.nz for more information or contact **HealthLine** on **0800 611 116**.

Relieving your pain changes the quality of your life, not its length.