



GUIDELINES AND AUDIT
IMPLEMENTATION NETWORK

PATIENT INFORMATION LEAFLET OPIOIDS

February 2011

There are many different types of medications available to help relieve your pain. One type of painkiller is called an opioid

What is an opioid?

Opioids refer to Morphine and 'morphine type' medications. Opioid medicines have been used to relieve pain for many years and include:

- **Weak** opioids such as Codeine, Dihydrocodeine and Tramadol
- **Strong** opioids include Morphine, Diamorphine, Oxycodone, Fentanyl, and Buprenorphine

Opioid medicines can help manage *some* but *not all* types of pain, and they will be prescribed by your doctor if it is felt they are the best treatment for your pain. They are available as tablets, liquid medicines, suppositories, skin patches and for injection.

Will I become addicted to morphine or morphine type drugs?

It is **very rare** for people to become addicted when they are taking morphine for pain. However, your body may become 'used to' the medication which means that if you stop taking it suddenly, you may experience symptoms of withdrawal or 'cold turkey'. These symptoms include stomach cramps, diarrhoea and sweating. Therefore **do not** stop taking your medication except under advice from a doctor.

Should you develop these symptoms, contact a doctor as soon as possible. If morphine or morphine type drug are no longer needed it will be possible to discontinue it safely under medical supervision.

What side effects am I likely to experience from the opioids?

Here are some common side effects which you may experience when you start taking opioids or when the dose is increased.

- Constipation. This is very common and you will probably need to take a regular laxative.
- Nausea. Occurs for the first few days after starting but will then settle. Anti-sickness medication can be taken to prevent this.
- Drowsiness. This usually wears off in a few days. *See points below about driving

Are there any other effects that I should be aware of?

Tell your doctor or nurse as soon as possible if you experience any of the following:

- More muddled in thoughts
- Feeling more sick than usual
- Feeling restless or jumpy
- Bad dreams or hallucinations

Your doctor may reduce your dose of opioid and suggest other treatments for your pain

Why have I been prescribed TWO opioid medicines for my pain?

It is important to control background pain and also make sure you have additional medicine for **breakthrough pain** and so your doctor may have prescribed both;

- **Long acting opioids** - These take a few hours to start reducing pain and last 12 - 24 hours depending on the type of tablet or capsule prescribed. Opioid patches may also be used and these can last for 3-7 days depending on type of patch. These medications help control your **background pain**, so you must take them regularly to prevent pain recurring,
- **Short-acting opioids**: these act quickly but usually wear off within a few hours and are taken when you have **breakthrough pain**.

What is breakthrough pain?

When taking medications for chronic and severe pain you can occasionally experience bursts of pain. This is called 'breakthrough pain' which comes on rapidly, and can be extremely debilitating, lasting from minutes to hours. It can occur for no apparent reason or be brought on by movement. Your doctor will prescribe a short-acting opioid for this type of pain. It is important that you discuss episodes of breakthrough pain with your Doctor, in case either of your pain medicines need to be adjusted.



What do I do if I have predictable breakthrough pain?

If you know something in particular triggers your breakthrough pain you should take the short acting opioid before the event that causes the pain to try and prevent the pain occurring. Your doctor will advise you how long in advance you should take it..

What do I do if I have unpredictable breakthrough pain?

If the pain is unpredictable, then you should take the breakthrough medication as soon as the pain starts since it may take some time for the short-acting opioids to work.

What else can I do for my breakthrough pain?

Some people find their pain improves with resting, rubbing the painful area, using heat e.g. a hot water bottle or cold e.g. an ice pack, or other non-drug methods e.g. TENS machine.

What do I do if my pain is not controlled?

Speak to your doctor or nurse as soon as possible

How do I store opioids at home?

- Keep in their original containers, clearly labelled and store safely at room temperature in a dry place, preferably in a locked cupboard, out of the reach and sight of children
- The label should provide storage instructions but check with your pharmacist if you are unsure

What do I do with unused opioids?

Unused opioids should be returned to the pharmacist for safe disposal. Do not flush them down the toilet or throw them away.

Can I drink alcohol when taking opioids?

Alcohol may increase some of the side effects of opioids and should be avoided or discussed with your Doctor.

Can I continue to drive whilst I am taking these medicines?

- When you first start opioids you may feel drowsy. It is important that you **do not drive** when drowsy.
- **Do not drive** if your dose of medication is increased as you may again feel drowsy. You must wait until this side effect has passed before driving.
- **Do not drive** soon after taking a breakthrough dose as this may also make you drowsy. You need to wait and reassess whether you feel fit to drive.

****Your doctor may have told you that you are fit to drive, but remember it is your responsibility to decide whether you are fit to drive on each occasion.****

Should I inform the Drivers Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland (DVLNI) that I have been prescribed opioids?

You do not have to inform the DVLNI that you are starting an opioid. However, there may be other information about your illness that the DVLNI needs to know. Your doctor or the DVLNI can advise you about this.

What precautions I have to consider when travelling abroad whilst taking opioids?

- Be aware of current restrictions regarding volume of liquids carried in hand luggage when flying.
- All prescribed opioids need to be carried in hand luggage in their original packaging i.e. not in unlabelled pill organisers or bottles
- You must obtain a letter from your Doctor confirming the following details
 - Your name, address and date of birth.
 - The outward and return dates of travel.
 - The country / countries being visited
 - The names, dosages and total amounts of the controlled drugs being carried.
- If you are travelling to or from the UK for a period of **less than 3 months** you may carry a supply of controlled drugs through UK customs without need for a specific Home Office License.
- If you intend to travel with prescribed controlled drugs for a period **greater than 3 months**, you will need to apply in advance for a Home Office personal export licence to pass through UK customs. A personal licence can be downloaded at <http://www.drugs.gov.uk/drugs-laws/licensing/personal>. Allow 10 working days before travel date.



- It is important to check with the relevant embassy / consulate that the country or countries you intend to visit will permit you to enter with a supply of opioids for medical use. See <http://drugs.homeoffice.gov.uk/publication-search/drug-licences/embassy-list.html>

If you require more information or have any concerns about your medications please speak to your doctor.

