

Reducing Dependence on Opioid Painkillers



Darwen Healthcare

"Where your health matters"

Why stop taking Opioids long term

Opioids like morphine, oxycodone or fentanyl are very good painkillers for short-term pain after surgery or after an accident (such as a broken bone). This is known as acute pain and lasts days or weeks.

It used to be thought that opioids were also useful for people with longer-lasting pain. This is known as chronic pain and goes on for months or years. We now know that opioids don't help long-term pain and, more importantly, are not safe to take for longer periods of time. Doing this can cause side effects, addiction or early death.

Oxycodone and fentanyl are stronger drugs than morphine. If you are taking these drugs as tablets or using patches, we can work out how much the same dose would be in morphine. We call this the 'morphine equivalent' dose.

The British Pain Society recommends that people with chronic pain should take no more than 120 mg of morphine equivalent a day. This includes all opioid tablets, capsules or liquids you take or patches you use.

Research shows that people who take more than 100 mg 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 effects of Opioid Medication

Constipation and nausea (feeling sick)

Daytime sleepiness, poor concentration and poor memory

Problems sleeping at night, including snoring or difficulty breathing

Effects on hormones

particularly low testosterone levels (women have testosterone too, 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'd expect to hurt a bit can feel extremely painful. So, rather than help reduce pain, the opioids start to make your pain system more sensitive. Stopping opioids completely will reverse this effect, so you may find that your pain gets better once you've stopped taking opioids.

Effects of Opioids on your Social Life

In March 2015, a new **drug driving law** was introduced. It limits for **morphine** (as well as other drugs), above which you shouldn't drive. The maximum blood level is 80mcg/l, which is approximately **200mg of morphine equivalent a day**.

Tests showed that people with blood levels of morphine above this can have slower reaction times and decision times, leading to problems judging distance and their own speed. Driving ability gets even worse if you are also taking other medication that make you feel sleepy, like diazepam, amitriptyline or gabapentin, this can also include medication that contains codeine, tramadol and some over the counter medication from your pharmacy. Many medications carry warnings about driving and using machinery and will increase the risk when combined with the above.

Combinations of medication and alcohol can combine to affect your driving skills and in the event of the police attending an accident all drivers will be tested for any substance that can reduce concentration.

Whatever drugs you are taking, you must never drive if you don't feel safe to do so.

Tolerance, Dependence & 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 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.

Working with you to reduce Dependence

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 us 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 worsen for a short while. These symptoms shouldn't last long and we suggest that you use distraction or relaxation techniques to help during this time. Music, books or films can be useful for distraction, as well as getting out and keeping active, even if it is just walking.

There is a Headspace app which can also help with relaxation (see next section). Having nice snacks or drinks may help if you lose your appetite, and also can stop you from becoming dehydrated.

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

The following are useful resources that may help you manage during reduction of your opioid medicine:-

The **Pain Toolkit**

This gives practical advice and techniques to help manage pain.

Website: www.paintoolkit.org

Another good explanation of **how your mood can affect pain**.

Website: www.tamethebeast.org

Videos about chronic pain and how to manage it

Chronic pain - www.healthtalk.org

Apps:

Mindfulness: www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app

Being More Active : <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/for-your-body/move-more/>