

Risks of Opioid Medications

What are opioids?

Morphine and morphine-like medicines such as tramadol, oxycodone, fentanyl, buprenorphine and tapentadol are known as opioids. They are often referred to as strong painkillers and are frequently used to manage pain following injury, surgery or long-term pain such as back pain or arthritis.

Opioids are not very helpful for the majority of people to manage long-term or chronic pain and can actually cause other health problems, particularly when used for long periods or at high doses.

Lower, safer doses can actually help you to feel less pain and improve your general health and well-being. Pain is best managed with a combination of different things such as exercise, physiotherapy and relaxation and not just medication.

What are the benefits of opioids?

Medicines like morphine may be helpful to reduce pain levels in the short term e.g. less than 6 months. Despite being referred to as painkillers, opioids and other medicines used for pain rarely take pain away altogether. It might be more helpful to call them '*pain modifiers*'.

If opioids do reduce your pain levels, then you should aim to increase your activity e.g. slowly increasing exercise, stretching exercises etc in order to improve your ability to do more of the things you want. The aim of chronic pain management is to increase activity, improve quality of life and not just to reduce pain.

If you have taken opioids for more than 3 months and are not having an improvement in your pain or activity levels, even after increasing the dose, or if you experience side-effects that affect your day-to-day activities, then it is likely that the medication is not working. You need to work with your healthcare team to review your pain management.

What are the side-effects of opioids?

Common side-effects from these medicines are constipation, nausea, vomiting and drowsiness. It may be more difficult to think clearly. Other side-effects are flushing, sweating, itching, difficulty passing urine and jerkiness. Not everyone will get these side-effects and often they will settle with time. Side-effects may be more noticeable at the start of treatment or when the dose is increased.

You should not drive or operate machinery if you feel drowsy or confused whilst taking any medication. If you are affected and you decide to drive, you can be charged with a driving offence particularly if you have an accident.

You should not increase the dose of opioid medication yourself, without checking with your GP or a pain specialist first. Increasing your dose may lead to more side-effects, severe drowsiness and breathing difficulties.

Are there alternatives to opioid medications?

Yes there are. Non-opioid medicines and non-drug therapies can improve your pain management, general health and well-being and help to reduce your use of opioids.

Long-term management of pain has been shown to be better if you learn other ways to manage it such as stretching and exercise, relaxation and pacing activity e.g. breaking activity down to make it more manageable. Advice on suitable stretches and exercise is available from the NHS Choices website (www.NHS.uk). Your GP can also make a 'referral for exercise' for you if you need more support.

Can opioids be harmful?

Using opioids for long-periods or at high dose may be more harmful than helpful for your pain and general health. The longer you take them and the higher the dose used, the greater the risks of harm become.

What are the harms of opioids?

1. **Serious bodily harm, overdose or death**

Overdose causes your breathing and thinking to slow down, your speech is slurred and you may not be able to walk properly. Overdose is not always caused by taking too much of your medication, it can happen if something else about your health changes. **You need to seek urgent medical care if you experience any of these symptoms.**

2. **Increased pain levels**

Higher doses of opioids can make you become more sensitive to pain. This is due to changes in your nervous system that happen with long-term pain and long-term opioid use. Increasing the dose further will not make your pain improve and increases your risk of becoming dependent on the medicine and other harm from them.

3. **Hormone changes**

Using opioid medication for more than six months can have an affect on sex hormones, which can cause impotence in men and loss of libido in both men and women. Long-term opioid use has also been linked to infertility in men and women.

4. **Drowsiness or change in thinking**

You may not think as clearly when using opioid medication and this is likely to worsen with higher doses. Taking the medication may make you feel 'spaced out' or 'relaxed' rather than reducing your pain. This might indicate that you are using the medication for the wrong reasons e.g. to relax rather than reduce pain.

5. **Increased risk of physical dependence**

This is a sign that your body has adapted to the medicines and you may experience withdrawal effects if you miss a dose or are late taking it.

6. **Decreased immune function**

Long-term treatment reduces the activity of your immune system and can cause an increased risk of infection.

7. **Poor muscle tone**

The drowsiness and increased sensitivity to pain caused by taking opioids can make it difficult to exercise and stay active. This leads to poor muscle tone, which affects your posture, and stability and can make your pain feel worse.

8. **Increased risk of falls and fractures**

Long-term or high dose opioids increased your risk of falling and of developing osteoporosis, both of which can lead to bone fractures.

9. **Depression and anxiety**

There is an increased risk of depression and anxiety when you take opioids for long periods of time. This can make managing your pain even harder.

10. **Dry mouth**

Lack of saliva can increase your risk of dental caries and tooth loss.

What are the benefits of reducing opioids?

You may experience less pain and be able to increase your activity, mood and ability to think more clearly. You will feel less drowsy or 'spaced out' and be safer to drive. You will have more energy and be able to gradually increase activity and exercise, which, in turn, can help to reduce your pain levels.

Reducing your dose of opioids also reduces your risk of side-effects and harm to your general health and well-being.

Reductions must be made slowly to prevent unpleasant withdrawal effects. Never stop or change your medication without discussing it with your healthcare provider first.

Questions

- Do you still have pain despite using your opioid medication regularly?
- Does your medication cause side-effects that affect your daily activities e.g. drowsiness that stops you driving
- Have you noticed a change in your sex drive or sexual function?
- Do you take your medication because it helps you to relax?

If you answer 'yes' to any of those questions, it is likely that the opioid medication is not doing what it is supposed to and may be causing you harm.

Make an appointment to discuss your pain management with your healthcare provider.