

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 health provider first.

For example, if you were taking slow-release morphine 60mg twice a day; you could try reducing the dose to 55mg morning and night for two weeks. Then, if your pain was no different and you were not experiencing any other problems, reduce it again to 50mg morning and night. You may need to take longer between changes or you may want to reduce it weekly instead. This will depend upon how you are finding the changes.

Any reduction you can make will be good for your general health and wellbeing.

You will need to change your prescription to enable you to do this and you can also discuss with your healthcare provider, other ways to manage your pain effectively and to increase your activity.

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.



GIG
CYMRU
NHS
WALES

Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol
Abertawe Bro Morgannwg
University Health Board



Reducing 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.

Opioid medicines are now understood to be most useful when used for short periods of time e.g. less than 6 months. This is because they have side-effects which can be unpleasant and harmful. Also continuing them for longer can in some cases, make pain worse and cause other health problems.

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. Reducing pain levels without increasing how much you are able to do is not the desired outcome of pain management.

How long should I stay on an opioid?

This partly depends on why it was started. If you were discharged from hospital on an opioid following surgery for example, then you would expect to see a reduction in your pain over a few weeks as you recover. This would also be the case if you had started opioids to manage pain before having surgery.

If you have chronic or long-term pain and have taken opioids for a number of months already, then your pain may have improved and you may be able to reduce the dose of opioids you are taking.

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.

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?

As well as side-effects, opioids can cause changes in hormone levels which can lead to impotence and loss of sexual function; immune changes making you more likely to get infections. Opioids can cause hypersensitivity, which can make pain worse – increasing the dose can make this worse rather than better. They can make you depressed and anxious as well as making it difficult to think clearly. People using opioids are more likely to fall and break bones. There is also a risk of becoming dependent on the opioid drugs and in some cases, developing addiction.

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.

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