

Life Beyond Pain



Risks and Benefits of Opioid Medications

OPIOID MEDICATIONS

Opioids are a group of medications providing pain relief by acting on areas in the spinal cord and brain to block the transmission of pain signals. The most common medications that belong to this group are codeine, dihydrocodeine, tramadol, buprenorphine, morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, and diamorphine (heroin). They are often referred to as “strong painkillers” and are incredibly good to treat short-term pain, otherwise known as acute pain, such as pain following surgery or injury e.g., a broken bone.

Medical knowledge is constantly changing and improving, we used to think that opioids are also useful for long-term pain, otherwise known as persistent pain, which lasts for months and years. We now know that opioids do not help long-term pain, and more importantly, are not safe to take for prolonged periods. Doing this can cause troublesome side effects, addiction, or damage to the body and in time even increase pain levels. In some situations, can also contribute to an early death.

Lower, safer doses of appropriate medication can help you to feel less pain and improve your general health and well-being. Persistent pain is best managed with a combination of many things: understanding your body well, exercise, relaxation, and physiotherapy. Medication and clinical intervention should only be used as additional help, not a primary solution.

THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

OPIOID MEDICATIONS

Why Doctors are not always happy to prescribe?

BENEFITS OF OPIOID MEDICATIONS

Why do they seem so popular?

When are they most helpful?

HARMS OF OPIOID MEDICATIONS

Why are healthcare professionals advising you to stop them, even when you are still in pain?

BENEFITS OF OPIOID MEDICATIONS

Opioid medications may be helpful to reduce pain levels in the short term, while your body is healing e.g., after an accident or surgery. They are also found to be beneficial for people at the end of their life suffering from cancer pain.

Only 20-30% of people suffering from long-term pain will find opioids helpful. Unfortunately, even if you are in this lucky minority due to the way how opioids interact with the human body, their beneficial effects cannot be sustained long-term.

If opioids do reduce your pain levels, you should make the most of that benefit and aim to increase your activity e.g., gentle exercises such as walking, swimming, and stretching. That will increase your ability to do more things that you love in life and set you on the road to recovery.

Regardless of the origin of your pain, if you would like to get the most out of your medication and to make sure that your treatment is safe and in line with the latest recommendations, please contact your GP practice to discuss further.

HARMS OF OPIOID MEDICATIONS



Unfortunately, opioids come with their risks and side effects, that can have a significant impact on your quality of life. Often those side effects are not attributed to the medication itself but to your painful condition, which in turn leads to an increase in the medication dose leading to a further decrease in your daily functioning and quality of life.

The longer opioids are taken, the higher dose is necessary due to the body developing tolerance to the drug, which in turn poses a greater risk of side effects and harm to your general health and wellbeing.

In some cases, opioid medications can make pain feel worse. Due to a phenomenon called Opioid-Induced Hyperalgesia. It is a state where the body becomes more sensitive to pain due to changes in the nervous system caused by prolonged use of opioid medication at high doses.

To get the most out of your opioid medications it's CRUCIAL to have them regularly reviewed by experienced healthcare professionals to determine if the therapy is still safe and effective for you.

Other Side effects of opioid therapy...

WHEN YOU FIRST START TAKING OPIOIDS...

Some side effects may occur at the beginning of the therapy, and get better with time or with the help of other medications, such as

- Dizziness
- Nausea and Vomiting
- Sleepiness
- Confusion
- Constipation

WHEN YOU ARE ON LONG-TERM OPIOID THERAPY...

Some other problems can occur when you take opioid medications for a prolonged period, such as

- Itching
- Dry mouth
- Reduced sex drive
- Weight gain
- Drowsiness
- Increased risk of falls
- Difficulty breathing at night. This is most common if you are overweight and if you snore heavily. If you have a condition called obstructive sleep apnea, it may not be safe for you to take opioids.

WHEN YOU ARE TAKING OPIOIDS FOR MANY MONTHS OR YEARS...

Some problems are more common when you take opioids medication for a prolonged period at high doses, such as

- Hormone changes - this may result in reduced fertility (making it more difficult to get pregnant), low sex drive, irregular periods, impotence, hot flashes, fatigue, anxiety, depression, osteoporosis (thinning of the bones that can lead to bone fractures)
- Decreased immune function- the reduced ability of your body to fight infections.
- Increased risk of Tolerance (when your medication becomes less effective over time as your body got used to its pain-relieving effect), Dependence (when your body gets used to opioids and you no longer can stop them suddenly as your body will get withdrawal symptoms), Addiction (when you are no longer in control of how much of the medication you are taking, as your body is craving for it despite the negative effect on your physical and mental health).