

# Reducing and stopping opioids

## Information for patients

### Why stop taking opioids?

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 known as **chronic pain** which 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 medicines, 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 **120mg of morphine equivalent a day**. This includes all opioid tablets, capsules or liquids you take or patches you use.

### Side effects of opioids

- **Constipation and nausea (feeling sick)**
- **Daytime sleepiness, poor concentration, and poor memory**
- **Problems sleeping at night, including snoring or difficulty breathing**
- **Effects on hormones** such as reduced fertility, low sex drive, irregular periods, difficulty having sex, feeling tired, hot flushes, depression and osteoporosis.
- **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 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.

## Tolerance, dependence and 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. You might crave the medicine or carry on taking it even when it has a negative effect on your physical or mental health.

## Driving and opioids

In March 2015, a new **drug driving law** was introduced. It introduced a limit 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 and decision times, leading to problems judging distance and their own speed. Driving ability gets even worse if you are also taking other drugs that make you feel sleepy, like diazepam, amitriptyline or gabapentin, among others.

Other drugs, like codeine or tramadol, or some over the counter medication, can also affect your ability to drive safely.

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

## What can help me while I'm reducing my opioids?

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 your GP 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.

Having nice snacks or drinks may help, if you lose your appetite and 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 your opioids it can take 4-6 months to feel back to normal, so you will still need their support during this time.

Health Care Professionals supporting you such as your GP, Practice based Pharmacist, Nurse or Social Prescriber can discuss long term pain management strategies with you, including self-care resources.

The following section has a list of useful resources that may help you manage during reduction of your opioid medicine.

## Useful resources

There are many resources which can help you understand and manage your pain. These include:

### **The Pain Toolkit**

This gives practical advice and techniques to help manage pain.

Website: <https://www.pain toolkit.org/>

### **Live Well with Pain**

This site offers resources for patients exploring medication use, medication reviews, behaviour change, opioid prescribing.

<https://livewellwithpain.co.uk/resources/resources-for-your-patients/>

### **British Pain Society**

Helpful information section for patients with pain conditions, and details of various support groups.

<https://www.britishpainsociety.org/people-with-pain/>

### **Flippin' Pain**

This is a public health campaign with a goal to change the way we think about, talk about and treat persistent pain. Website contains includes patient leaflets, videos, podcasts, Ted Talks, booklets for both patients and clinicians:

<https://www.flippinpain.co.uk/>

### **“Brainman stops his opioids”**

Website: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI1myFQPdCE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI1myFQPdCE)

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

Website: <https://tamethebeast.org>

### **Videos about chronic pain and how to manage it**

Chronic pain - [www.healthtalk.org](http://www.healthtalk.org)

### **Chartered Society of Physiotherapy**

Website: <https://www.csp.org.uk/publications/10-things-you-need-know-about-your-back>

A very good video about back pain: <https://youtu.be/24P7cTQjsVM>

### **World Health Organisation (WHO) animated videos**

Depression: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc)

Stress: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6402QJp52M>

### **BNSSG Mental Wellbeing Toolkit Leaflet**

BNSSG CCG have developed a wellbeing leaflet which contains helpful advice to help you improve your wellbeing. <https://bnssgccg.nhs.uk/library/mental-wellbeing-leaflet/>

### **Apps:**

Mindfulness: [www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app](http://www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app)

Active walking: <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/#apps-and-tools>

Mood diary: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/wellmind/id918138339?mt=8>