

Opioids are strong medications used for pain relief in chronic and malignant diseases. Some examples of opioids are morphine, hydromorphone, methadone, fentanyl & codeine.

Why do doctors prescribe opioids?

- These drugs are used to control pain. Most people are free of pain when they use opioids correctly.
- With advice from your doctor or community health nurse, you may increase or decrease the dose to match your level of pain.
- Opioids can be used safely and effectively for weeks, months or years.

How should it be used?

- You will get the best pain relief from this medicine if you follow the schedule your doctor has set (even if this means waking up in the middle of the night to take a dose).
- This pain medicine works best if you take it at regular time periods so that pain does not 'break through'. Do not wait to feel pain before taking a dose. Take the dose on schedule whether you feel pain or not.
- If you feel pain between your scheduled doses, talk to your doctor about taking another smaller dose for this 'break through' pain.
- If you need 'break through' doses, your regular dose may need to be changed. Talk with your doctor or community health nurse.
- Before going to sleep, measure out and put your nightly doses of medicine by your bed.
- Do not change your dose or skip a dose without advice from your doctor or nurse.
- It is important to consult your doctor or nurse before taking any other new medicines.

If you have any questions or would like more information about Hospice services please contact the Vancouver Home Hospice Palliative Care Service Office or your local Community Health Centre/Office:

Vancouver Home Hospice Palliative Care Service

300-999 West Broadway
604-742-4010

North Community Health Office

200 - 1651 Commercial Drive
604-253-3575

South Community Health Office

6405 Knight Street
604-321-6151

Evergreen Community Health Centre

3425 Crowley Drive (at Joyce)
604-872-2511

Pacific Spirit Community Health Centre

2110 West 43rd Avenue
604-261-6366

Pender Community Health Centre

59 West Pender Street
604-669-9181

Three Bridges Community Health Centre

1292 Hornby Street
604-736-9844

Raven Song Community Health Centre

2450 Ontario Street
604-709-6400

Palliative Access Line

604-263-7255

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Pain Control with Opioids

Vancouver Home Hospice
Palliative Care Service

What side effects can I expect?

Not everyone has side effects from opioids but you may have some unwanted effects. Most of these go away in time and can be controlled.

Call your doctor if you experience side effects. DO NOT stop taking your medicine as this may leave you in pain.

- **Constipation** is a common on-going problem for people taking opioids. Drink plenty of liquids to help keep the stools soft. You may need to change your diet. Talk about this and the use of stool softeners and laxatives with your nurse or doctor.
- You may feel **drowsy or confused or slow in your thinking** when you first start to take opioids, or after an increase in the dose. These symptoms usually disappear after a few days. If you are still having problems after 3 -4 days, call your doctor or nurse.
- You may have some **nausea** for a day or two after you begin to use opioids. It may help to eat small amounts of foods you like often during the day. If you feel really sick or if the nausea lasts longer than 2 – 3 days, call your doctor.

Uncommon side effects include:

- sweating
- hallucinations
- itching
- difficulty passing urine

Tell your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms.

Common concerns/questions

Q *Will I become addicted to opioids?*

No. You will not become addicted to this medicine if you use it properly. When you take opioids under the care of a doctor, you will not develop a ‘compulsive’ need. If your pain can be controlled in other ways, opioids can be slowly cut down and stopped no matter how much you take or how long you have taken them.

Q *Will I become tolerant to opioids, so that they won’t work if the pain gets ‘really bad’?*

No. The dose can always be increased to match your need. If needed, other medications can also be added to keep the pain under control.

Q *Can I drink alcohol while on this drug?*

Discuss this with your doctor. The doctor’s recommendation will depend on your particular situation.

Q *Is it safe to keep opioids at home?*

Yes. When used for pain control, it is completely legal. As with any other drug, opioids should always be kept out of reach of children.

Opioid Preparations

Opioids come in a number of different forms and strengths. Each one has its advantages.

Liquid Liquid opioids come in different strengths. This makes changing doses simple. People find them easy to swallow and can mix them with water or juice to taste better. They begin to work within 20 minutes.

Pills Many opioids come in pill form. There are some differences in how long they last, how strong they are, and how fast they work. Your doctor or nurse can explain which kind may serve you best.

Suppositories Opioids also come in suppository form. Again, the differences have to do with how long they last, how fast they work and their strength.

Skin Patches Patches work by releasing medication through the skin. Patches are useful in certain situations. Discuss this with your doctor or nurse. They begin to work in about 12 hours.

Injections Opioids may be given by injection if you are not able to swallow or absorb oral medication. A small needle is placed under the skin, attached to a small tube and a piece of clear plastic tape is put over the top to keep it in place. The medication is then given through the tube attached to the needle. Your skin absorbs the opioid and begins to deliver pain relief within 10 minutes. Family members can learn to give medications this way.

Refilling your prescription

Opioids are available at most pharmacies. Your pharmacist can explain how to refill your prescription. A new written prescription is needed for each refill. Tell your doctor if you need a new prescription at least 3 days before your supply runs out. Use the same pharmacy when you renew your prescription so they will always have enough of your medications on hand. The pharmacist can keep a complete record of all your medications and know if other drugs will interact with the opioid.

Opioids are safe and effective when used properly as prescribed by your doctor. They allow you to continue enjoying life and taking part in the activities you love!