

Use of Opioids for Persistent Pain

Information for patients

What are opioid medications?

They are powerful pain-relieving medications that are related to morphine. They are very effective at treating acute (short term) pain such as after an operation, and cancer pain. In the past they have also been used to treat persistent or chronic pain (pain lasting more than 3-6 months), however we now know that this may not be the best option for this kind of pain.

Are there different types of opioids?

There are different types of drugs in this group. Their strength varies depending on the drug and the dose. Some examples include Morphine, Oxycodone, Buprenorphine, Fentanyl, Methadone.

Are opioids the best pain killers for persistent pain?

Opioids are very strong pain killers, but are not suitable for all types of pain. Some pains (e.g. nerve pain, or neuropathic pain) are better managed in a different way. Non-drug methods of pain management can reduce pain more than opioid medicines in some cases, and cause less side effects. Some people also find that their persistent pain is not responsive to opioid treatment.

Will these medications take away my pain completely?

The aim of treatment in persistent pain is to reduce the pain so that you can do more of your daily activities – it is unlikely that medication will take away the pain completely. Understanding this and using medicines as just one method of pain management in combination with non-drug options is important. If you are on high doses of opioids (equivalent to 100mg of morphine per day or more) and your pain is still present it is possible that opioids do not work for your pain.

You would probably feel better and reduce your risk of associated problems if your opioids were reduced, either to a lower dose or stopped altogether.

What are the side effects of opioids?

The commonest side effects of these medications are dizziness, sickness, sleepiness, confusion, itching, alterations in mood, constipation, weight gain and reduced sexual drive. A more dangerous side-effect is decreased breathing. Side effects are more likely if you are taking high doses of opioids (equivalent to 100mg of morphine per day or more). They are also more likely if you take other medications that cause similar side effects, such as sleeping tablets, other pain medication or anti-depressants. If you are worried about side effects, you should discuss this with your GP.

What non-drug treatment options are available?

You may wish to discuss options such as physiotherapy, heat or cold pack application, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) or meditation techniques such as mindfulness with your GP. Online resources for patients on how to manage persistent pain may also be useful.

How should opioids be reduced?

If you are concerned about side effects or wish to reduce your opioid medication please discuss this with your GP. You may also be invited for a medication review if you are taking high doses of opioids (more than the equivalent of 100mg of morphine per day) to discuss whether this could be reduced. It is important that you do not stop taking opioids suddenly as you may suffer from side effects – your GP can work with you to decide on a reducing regime to enable you to safely reduce your opioids with minimal side effects.