

Patient Information Leaflet – Use of Opioids for Mild to Moderate Pain

What are opioid medications?

They are pain-relieving medications that are related to morphine. They are very effective at treating acute (short term) pain such as after an operation, following an acute injury or for treatment of 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. Lower strength opioids that are usually used for management of mild to moderate pain that does not respond to paracetamol or anti-inflammatories alone include;

- codeine (including in combination with paracetamol as co-codamol)
- dihydrocodeine (including in combination with paracetamol as co-dydramol)
- tramadol

Are opioids the best pain killers for mild to moderate pain?

Opioids 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. There is also evidence that opioids are not the best choice for persistent pain, therefore if your pain continues for more than 3-6 months your GP may want to review how you manage this, and may reduce your opioid medication if there has been no benefit.

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. 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 else can I do to manage my pain?

If your pain is related to a specific event such as trauma or an operation it should improve as you start to recover. Therefore it is usually recommended that you start by taking regular pain relief, and reduce what you take as you start to feel better. Other pain relief may be appropriate for you such as paracetamol and anti-inflammatories – your local community pharmacist will be able to advise on whether these may be appropriate for you to purchase from them. Other methods of managing pain such as physiotherapy, TENS machines etc. may also be suitable for you, and can be discussed with your GP or practice nurse.

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 have been taking opioids for a long time (more than 6 months), as opioids are unlikely to be effective if your pain is persistent. Your GP can work with you to decide on a reducing regime to enable you to safely reduce your opioids with minimal side effects.