Strong Painkillers and Driving
Information for patients
Introduction

Strong painkillers can have different effects on different people. Some strong painkillers can cause drowsiness and slow down your reactions, especially if you take them with other medications such as anti-sickness medicines, anti-depressants or other pain medicines such as gabapentin. This drowsiness may go away once you have been on the same dose for five days or more.

Strong painkillers commonly prescribed by doctors include codeine, tramadol, Oramorph, MST continus, Oxynorm, Oxycontin and buprenorphine and fentanyl patches. Your doctor or pharmacist will be able to tell you whether or not the medication prescribed to you may affect your driving.

Changes in the law

The law on driving when taking certain drugs (prescription and non-prescription) above a specified limit changed in March 2015. This law includes some strong pain medications which have the potential to be abused or misused.

If you are caught driving with any of these medications above the specified limit in your body, you could be breaking the law. However, if you take your medication according to the instructions given by your prescribing doctor and your driving is not affected, then you are not breaking the law. It is therefore your responsibility to know how your medication affects you before driving.

What if I am stopped by the police?

The police can carry out a roadside ‘field impairment test’ if they think your driving is being affected by drugs. This is a series of tests, such as asking you to walk in a straight line. In order to find out the level of the drug in your body, they may need to take you to the police station for a blood test.

The law provides you with a ‘medical defence’ that states you are not guilty if the drug has been prescribed to you to treat a medical problem and if you took it according to the instructions of the prescriber.
However, if your driving is impaired despite following the prescriber’s instructions, you could still be found guilty of breaking the law. Once again, it is important that you know how your medication affects you before driving.

**Will it affect my driving license or my car insurance?**

You do not need to inform the DVLA that you are taking a strong painkiller. However, there may be other information about your health condition that the DVLA needs to know. Your doctors or the DVLA can advise you about this.

You may need to inform your car insurance company about your health condition and what medication you are taking. You should discuss your current circumstances with your insurance company to make sure that you are covered to drive.

**Important points to remember**

- The law states that it is an offence to drive with certain medicines above a specified limit in your body, whether or not they affect your driving.
- If you are taking these medications as prescribed and your driving is not affected then you are not breaking the law.
- Keep taking your medications. If you are concerned about whether you should drive speak to your doctor or pharmacist.
- Check the leaflet that comes with your medicine or check with your doctor or pharmacist on how your medications may affect your driving ability.
- Do not drive until you know how your medication affects you; this may take up to 5 days.
- Do not drive if you feel drowsy, dizzy, unable to concentrate or if your vision is affected.
- If your driving is impaired then you are breaking the law, even if you have taken your medication as prescribed by your doctor.
Further information

For advice on whether or not your medications may affect your driving, please contact your doctor or pharmacist.

For advice on what medications or health conditions you need to tell the DVLA about, visit the DVLA website at www.gov.uk/contact-the-dvla or call 0845 850 0095.

For further information on the new law go to www.gov.uk/drug-driving-law.

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call 01865 221 473 or email PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk