NHS
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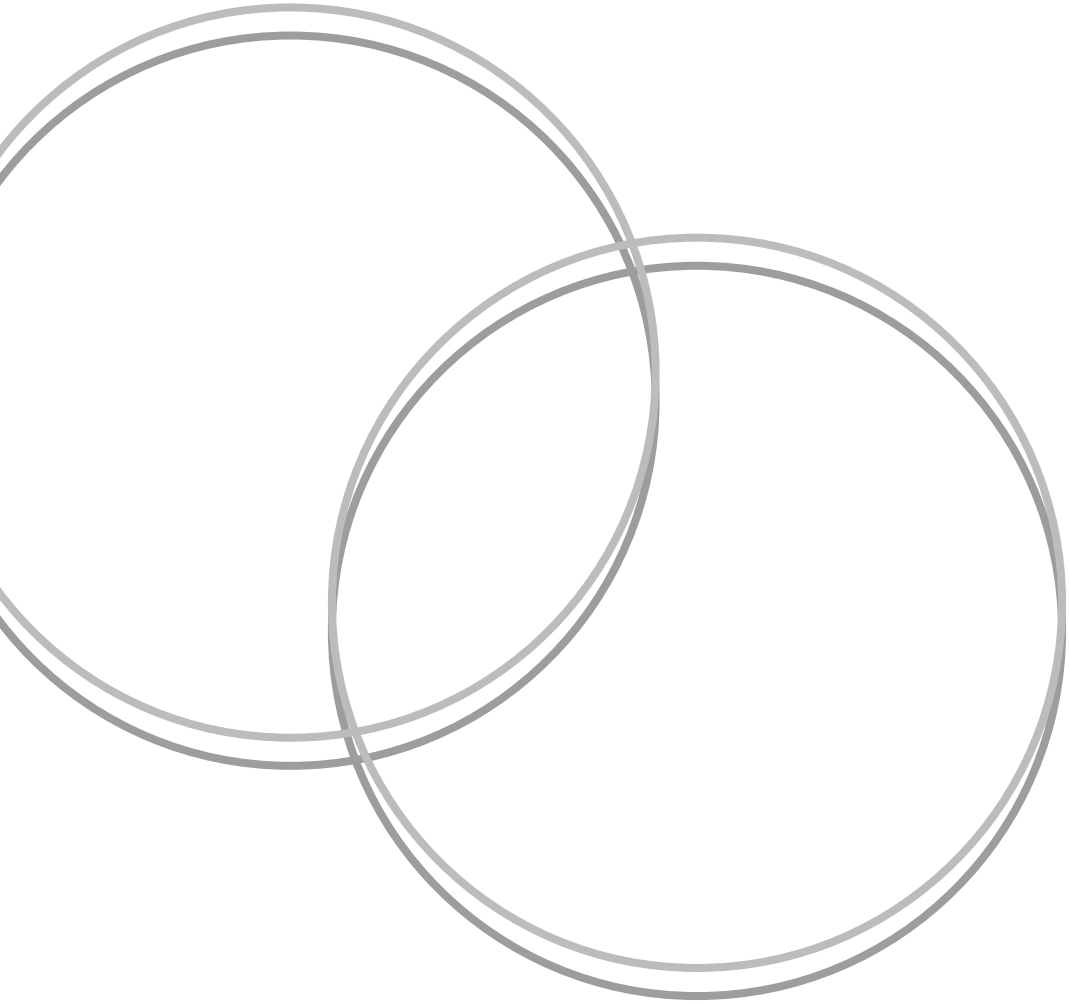
Reducing and stopping opioids

Information for patients and carers



Why stop taking opioids?

Opioids are strong pain medicines. Some examples are **morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, codeine, dihydrocodeine and tramadol**.

These medicines work well for **short-term pain**, like pain after an operation or an accident. This type of pain is called **acute pain** and usually lasts **a few days or weeks**.

We now know that opioids **do not help long-term pain** (pain that lasts for months or years, also known as **chronic pain**).

We also now know that taking opioids for a long time can be **unsafe**. They can cause **side effects, addiction**, or even **early death**.

Some opioids are stronger than others. Oxycodone and fentanyl are stronger than morphine. We work out your total amount by using something called a **"morphine equivalent dose."**

For long-term pain, experts say people should not take more than **50–90mg of morphine equivalent a day**.

The maximum of 90mg could be:

- **45mg morphine twice a day,** or
- **30mg oxycodone twice a day,** or
- **a 25 microgram fentanyl patch**

If you take more than this, please speak to your doctor.

If you take extra doses of short-acting opioids (e.g. Oramorph, OxyNorm) then these will also count towards the maximum dose and increase your risk, so please let your doctor know everything that you're taking.

Studies from the USA found that people taking **high doses** of opioids are more likely to die from overdose or side effects than people who don't take opioids or take only a very small amount.

The main reasons to stop opioids are:

- They don't help long-term pain
- They cause many side effects
- They can make life worse, not better
- Most people feel better once they stop taking them

Side effects of opioids

Opioids can cause many problems, such as:

Stomach problems

- **Constipation** (hard poo)
- **Feeling sick**

Constipation can damage your bowel over time and may make **depression** worse.

Feeling sleepy or slow

- Feeling **very tired in the day**
- **Poor concentration**
- **Poor memory**

Sleeping problems

- **Snoring** or trouble breathing at night
- Waking up feeling **unrefreshed**
- Feeling **sleepy in the day**

Poor sleep can make your pain **worse**.

Hormone problems

Opioids can affect your hormones, including **testosterone** (women have some too).

This can cause:

- Low energy
- Low sex drive
- Irregular periods
- Trouble getting pregnant
- Hot flushes
- Depression
- Weak bones (osteoporosis), which can lead to fractures and **more pain**

Weaker immune system

You may get more infections, like:

- Chest infections
- Urine infections
- Wound infections after surgery

More sensitive to pain

Over time, opioids can make your nerves **more sensitive**.

This means things that shouldn't hurt much may feel **very painful**.

Stopping opioids can **reverse** this and many people find their pain feels **better** once they stop.

Tolerance, dependence and addiction

Tolerance

Your body gets used to opioids, so they stop working as well.

Dependence

Your body feels it "needs" the medicine.

If you stop suddenly, you might get **withdrawal symptoms**, like:

- Feeling shivery
- Feeling sweaty
- Diarrhoea
- Stomach cramps

Addiction

Some people may:

- Feel **out of control** with the medicine
- Worry about when they can take the next dose
- Crave the medicine
- Keep taking it even when it harms their health

Driving and opioids

There is a law that sets a limit for how much morphine you can have in your body while driving.

People with high opioid levels may:

- React more slowly
- Judge distance badly
- Make slower decisions

Driving is even more dangerous if you also take medicines like **diazepam, amitriptyline, pregabalin or gabapentin**, or medicines that make you sleepy.

Whatever you take, **never drive if you feel unsafe**.

What can help while reducing opioids?

You and your doctor, pharmacist or nurse will make a plan to **slowly** reduce your dose.

This helps keep withdrawal symptoms **mild**.

You may:

- Feel irritable
- Feel more anxious or sad
- Have worse pain for a short time

These feelings should pass.

Things that can help:

- **Distraction**: music, books, TV or films
- **Relaxation**: breathing exercises, apps (like Headspace)
- **Keeping active**: gentle walks or going outside
- **Eating small snacks** or drinking enough water

You will need **support from family and friends**.

Even after stopping opioids, it may take **4–6 months** to feel fully back to normal, so support is important.

Here are some helpful websites or services to support pain management and wellbeing.

Useful resources

Explaining pain

This is a five-minute cartoon explaining chronic pain.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KrUL8tOaQs

"Brainman stops his opioids"

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI1myFQPdCE

This video is a lovely explanation of how complex chronic pain is and what you can do to help:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUXPqphwp2U

This explains how your mood can affect pain.

www.tamethebeast.org

Helping you to live well with pain

Live Well With Pain is an excellent website for anyone living with chronic pain.

https://livewellwithpain.co.uk/

It has videos explaining pain, patient stories and loads of advice on how you can improve your quality of life, including information about better sleep, managing anxiety, and how to pace activities.

These are **videos showing patients who are living with pain**, and some describe how life is now that they have stopped their opioids:

https://livewellwithpain.co.uk/resources-for-people-with-pain/true-stories/

The **Pain Toolkit** app gives practical advice and techniques to manage pain.

www.paintoolkit.org

Keeping active

Ten things you need to know about your back:

www.csp.org.uk/publications/10-things-you-need-know-about-your-back

with a very good video about back pain:

https://youtu.be/24P7cTQjsVM

NHS active 10 app

Ideas for how to increase your activity:

https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/get-active/how-to-be-more-active/

with links to the **NHS Active 10 app** which tracks your steps and gives badge rewards for achievements!

Managing your mood

Depression: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc**

How to deal with unhelpful thoughts:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63zXqalSSFk

Mindfulness app:

www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app

Improving sleep

A video giving healthy sleep tips

https://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-hygiene/healthy-sleep-tips

An information sheet about sleep:

https://painconcern.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Sleep-1.0.pdf

Podcast:

Here a patient talks about stopping his opioids:

https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/ouh-nhs/episodes/Quitting-Prescription-Opioids---Patient-testimony-e271ik7

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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