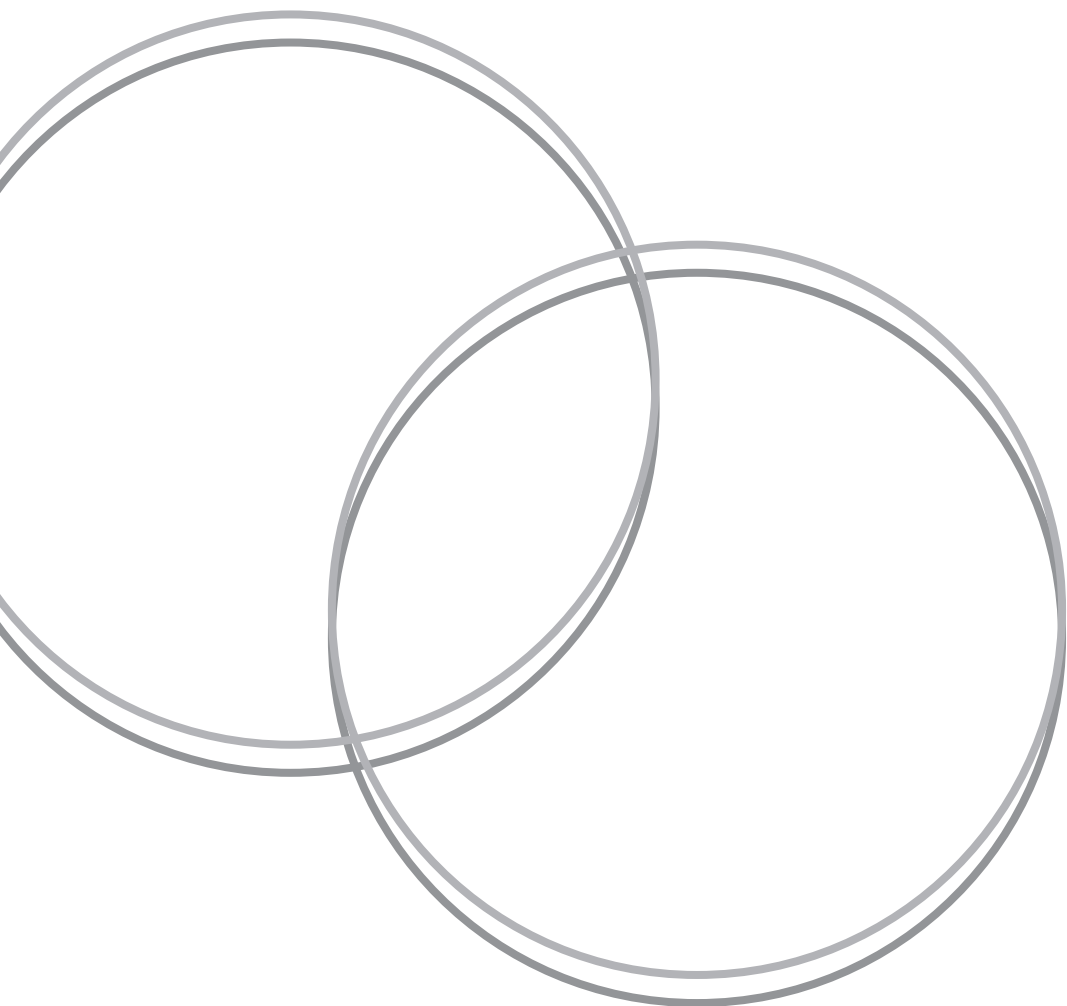




Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Reducing and stopping opioids

Information for patients and carers



Why stop taking opioids?

Opioids like **morphine**, **oxycodone** or **fentanyl** are very good painkillers for short-term pain after surgery or after an accident (such as a broken bone). This is known as **acute pain** and lasts days or weeks.

It used to be thought that opioids were also useful for people with longer-lasting pain. This is known as **chronic pain** and goes on for months or years. We now know that opioids don't help long-term pain and, more importantly, are not safe to take for longer periods of time as they can cause side effects, addiction or early death.

Oxycodone and fentanyl are stronger drugs than morphine. If you are taking these drugs as tablets or using patches, we can work out how much the same dose would be in morphine. We call this the 'morphine equivalent' dose.

The British Pain Society recommends that people with chronic pain should take no more than **120mg of morphine equivalent a day**. This includes all opioid tablets, capsules, liquids or patches. Research from the USA shows that people who take high doses of opioids have an increased risk of death (from overdose or side effects), compared to pain patients who take no opioids or a very small dose.

The main reasons for stopping opioids is that they don't help chronic pain, they cause side effects (see below) and lead to a worse quality of life, so people often have a better life without them.

Side effects of opioids

Constipation and nausea (feeling sick). There is new research showing that constipation can lead to, or worsen, depression

Daytime sleepiness, poor concentration and poor memory with forgetfulness or feeling low in energy.

Problems sleeping at night, including snoring or difficulty breathing and not waking up feeling refreshed, which means that you feel sleepy during the day.

Effects on hormones, particularly low testosterone levels (women have testosterone too, but in smaller amounts). The hormone effects can result in reduced fertility (making it more difficult to get pregnant), low sex drive, irregular periods, difficulty having sex, feeling tired, hot flushes, depression and osteoporosis (thinning of the bones).

Effects on your immune system. This can make it more likely that you get infections (chest infections, urine infections, or wound infections after surgery) as your immune system isn't as good at fighting infection.

Opioid-induced hypersensitivity. If you take opioids for a long time, they can start to make you more sensitive to pain. You may notice that sometimes a simple touch, like clothes rubbing on your skin, can feel painful, while something that you'd expect to hurt a little can feel extremely painful. So, rather than help reduce pain, the opioids start to make your pain system more sensitive.

Stopping opioids completely will reverse this effect, so you may find that your pain gets better once you've stopped taking opioids.

Tolerance, dependence and addiction

Tolerance is when opioids become less effective over time, as your body has got used to the pain-relieving effect.

Your body can also become **dependent** on opioids, so that if you stop taking them suddenly you can get symptoms of withdrawal, such as feeling shivery or sweaty, or having diarrhoea and stomach cramps. Some people may even notice these feelings while waiting for their next opioid dose.

Occasionally people in pain can become **addicted** to opioids. This can cause you to feel out of control about how much medicine you take or how often you take it. You might find that your whole day is taken up with planning your next dose, or that you're worrying that something might stop you from taking it on time. You might crave the medicine or carry on taking it even when it has a negative effect on your physical or mental health.

Driving and opioids

In March 2015, a new drug driving law was introduced. It introduced a limit for **morphine** (as well as other drugs), above which you shouldn't drive. Tests showed that people with high blood levels of morphine have problems judging distance and their own speed, and have slower reaction times and decision times. Driving ability gets even worse if you are also taking other drugs that make you feel sleepy, like diazepam, amitriptyline or gabapentin.

Other drugs, like codeine or tramadol, or some over the counter medication from your pharmacy, can also affect your ability to drive safely by making you feel sleepy, or have difficulty concentrating.

Whatever drugs you are taking at whatever dose, you must never drive if you don't feel safe to do so.

What can help me while I'm reducing my opioids?

We shall use a plan that reduces your opioid doses slowly. This will help to reduce the chance of developing feelings of withdrawal or, if you do, they will be mild. Withdrawal symptoms include feeling shivery or sweaty, having diarrhoea or stomach cramps.

You may find that you are more irritable than usual, or may feel more anxious or depressed. If this becomes a problem, speak with your GP about Talking Therapies or changes to your other, non-opioid medication.

Occasionally pain may worsen for a short while. These symptoms shouldn't last long and we suggest that you use distraction or relaxation techniques to help during this time. Music, books or films can be useful for distraction, and it is good to get out of the house and keep active, even if it just walking.

There is a Headspace app which can also help with relaxation (see next section), and having nice snacks or drinks may help if you lose your appetite, and also to help you from becoming dehydrated.

The most important thing you will need is support from family and friends, who should understand that this is an important but possibly difficult thing for you to do, particularly if you have been taking opioids for many years. Even after you stop all of your opioids it can take 4-6 months to feel back to normal, so you will still need their support during that time.

The following section has a list of useful resources that may help you during reduction of your opioid medicine, and to find new ways of managing your pain and having a better life.

Useful resources

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

Website: <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.

One of the videos it links to is this one about chronic pain, acceptance and commitment and is a lovely explanation of how complex chronic pain is and what you can do to help:

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

(ignore the Dutch subtitles!)

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

Website: www.paintoolkit.org

Hunter Integrated Pain Service (Australia). This is an excellent five-minute overview of what chronic pain is.

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

"Brainman stops his opioids"

Website: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ml1myFQPdCE

Another good explanation of how your mood can affect pain.

Website: www.tamethebeast.org

Videos about chronic pain and how to manage it

Chronic pain - www.healthtalk.org

Chartered society of physiotherapy

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

A very good video about back pain:

<https://youtu.be/24P7cTQjsVM>

World Health Organisation (WHO) animated videos

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

Stress: www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6402QJp52M

Apps:

Mindfulness: www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app

Active walking:

www.nhs.uk/oneyou/active10home#xfEeV0FM3W4Xo5gM.97

Mood diary:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/wellmindid918138339?mt=8>

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.

Author: Dr Jane Quinlan, Consultant in Anaesthetics and Pain Medicine, Oxford University Hospitals

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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

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charity@ouh.nhs.uk | 01865 743 444 | hospitalcharity.co.uk

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