

# Opioid medicines

This fact sheet contains information for patients, families and carers about the safe and effective use of opioid medicines.

## What are opioid medicines?

Opioid medicines are also called opioids or opiates. They include buprenorphine, codeine, dihydrocodeine, fentanyl, hydromorphone, methadone, morphine, oxycodone, tapentadol, and tramadol. Products containing opioids have many different brand names, and some may contain opioids combined with other medicines.

## What are opioid medicines used for?

Opioids are mainly used to help reduce severe pain. They are usually best used for the shortest time possible and at the lowest dose possible (unless used for cancer pain).

## What questions should I ask?

Ask your healthcare practitioner (e.g. doctor, nurse, pharmacist, dentist):

- What are the benefits and harms of this opioid?
- How and when should I use this opioid?
- For how long should I use this opioid?

Ask your healthcare practitioner for advice if you have any concerns about using this opioid or if your condition worsens.

## Why do I need a prescription?

Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) ensures opioids are tightly regulated to minimise the risk of harm from these strong medicines.

## Cautions with opioid medicines

**Can I use other medicines, or alcohol?** Some medicines can change the effects of opioids. Using opioids with alcohol, illegal drugs, or medicines that can make you feel sleepy (e.g. sleeping tablets, and some medicines used to treat pain, mental health conditions or allergies) increases your risk of opioid poisoning (overdose).

*Ask your healthcare practitioner for advice before using your opioid with other medicines (including herbal/natural medicines and medicines you buy online or from a pharmacy, supermarket or health food store) or alcohol. Do not use illegal drugs with opioid medicines.*

**Are there any side effects?** Common side effects include constipation, dizziness, drowsiness, headache, itch, dry mouth, nausea and vomiting.

*Ask your healthcare practitioner for advice if you think you have any side effects from your opioid.*

**Can I become dependent on this opioid?** If you use an opioid regularly for more than a few weeks, your body can form a dependence on the opioid. This means that you may get unpleasant symptoms if you lower your dose or stop your opioid too quickly. These withdrawal symptoms include muscle aches, sweating, fever, goose-bumps, runny nose, yawning, nausea, diarrhoea, stomach ache, anxiety, restlessness, and trouble sleeping.

*Ask your healthcare practitioner for advice before changing your dose or stopping your opioid.*

**How much will this opioid reduce the pain?** Opioids may not stop all your pain, and may give less pain relief over time. Increasing the dose may not help and may increase your risk of harm.

*Ask your healthcare practitioner for advice if your opioid does not give you enough pain relief, or makes you feel worse.*

**What if I am pregnant or breastfeeding?** Babies born to mothers using opioids may develop withdrawal symptoms. Babies being breastfed by women using opioids may develop opioid side effects.

*Ask your healthcare practitioner for advice if you are pregnant or breastfeeding.*

## What is opioid overdose?

Opioid overdose is opioid poisoning. It is a life-threatening medical emergency.

Your risk of overdose is higher if you :

- use higher opioid doses
- use more than one opioid at the same time
- do not follow the directions for use of your opioid
- use your opioid with alcohol, illegal drugs, or medicines that can make you feel sleepy.

*Opioid overdose can happen by accident.*

## What are signs of opioid overdose?

- Confusion
- Sleepiness
- Vomiting
- Making choking, snoring, or gurgling sounds
- Slow, shallow, unusual or no breathing
- Can't be woken up
- Cold, clammy, pale skin
- Blue lips or fingertips
- Limp body
- Small or pinpoint pupils

## If you suspect an opioid overdose, act fast to:

» **Phone 000 for an ambulance** and also

» **Give naloxone**

Naloxone is a medicine that reverses the effects of opioids for a short time. It helps the person with overdose to breathe while waiting for the ambulance.

*Ask your healthcare practitioner about naloxone for opioid overdose.*

For overdose first aid refer to:

- COPE – Overdose first aid at [www.penington.org.au/cope-overdose-first-aid/](http://www.penington.org.au/cope-overdose-first-aid/)
- Poisons Information Centre - phone 13 11 26

## Where can I find more information?

**NPS MedicineWise:** [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

Medicines Line: Phone 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

**Painaustralia:** [www.painaustralia.org.au](http://www.painaustralia.org.au)

**Palliative Care Australia:** <https://palliativecare.org.au>

**TGA:** [www.tga.gov.au/hubs/prescription-opioids](http://www.tga.gov.au/hubs/prescription-opioids)

## Your opioid may cause harm to others

- Never share your opioid with another person
- Keep your opioid in a secure place to prevent others using it
- Keep your opioid out of sight and reach of children and pets
- Take expired or leftover medicines to a pharmacy for safe disposal