

General information

Storage

It is important that opioids are stored in their original packaging in a safe, dry place out of the reach of children and pets. Any unwanted or unused opioids should be returned to the dispensing pharmacy for safe disposal.

Driving / Operating machinery

Some painkillers can affect the speed of your reactions or general alertness. You should not drive or operate machinery if you feel drowsy, dizzy, are unable to concentrate or make decisions, or if you have blurred or double vision.

You should not drive until your dose of modified release opioid has been stabilised, or for six hours after taking a fast acting opioid. You should inform your insurance company that you have been prescribed opioids.

Alcohol

Drinking alcohol whilst taking opioids is not advised as it may make you feel more drowsy than usual, but a small amount in moderation is fine.

Addiction or tolerance to opioids

There is no evidence opioids cause addiction when used to control pain in cancer, or for short periods (less than 3 months). You will not become tolerant to opioids, but if your pain worsens you may have to take an increased dose.

Stopping opioids

If you consider reducing or stopping your opioids, you should do so in discussion with your doctor or nurse. It is best to reduce doses gradually in a planned way, to avoid withdrawal effects from stopping too quickly.

Increasing the dose of opioids

It may be necessary to increase the dose of your opioid medication, particularly when you first start taking it in order to get the correct dose for you. Further increases in dose may be needed over time if the pain gets worse, under the guidance of your nurse or doctor.

Travel

If you plan to travel outside Jersey discuss with your doctor or nurse. You may need documentation to transport your strong opioids overseas.



Jersey Hospice Care
your care, your choice, your time

PATIENT INFORMATION LEAFLET

Strong Opioids

Contact Us

Specialist Palliative Care Team

Tel: (01534) 876555

Where I can find out more information

Contact your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you have any queries or would like more information after reading this leaflet.

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Strong opioids

Strong opioids are pain killers that are used to manage pain that has not been controlled by weaker pain medications (such as Paracetamol). They can also be used to relieve breathlessness or cough.

Opioids come in different preparations such as liquids, tablets or capsules. They can also be given by injection or by using a skin patch.

The names of some of the most commonly used strong opioids are:

- Morphine
- Oxycodone
- Diamorphine
- Buprenorphine
- Fentanyl

These opioids come as different brands, once you have started on one brand it is recommended that you try to stick to that brand. If you notice the opioid medicine you have been given looks different in any way to previous supplies discuss this with your pharmacist.

Some opioids are 'long acting' or 'modified release' which means they release medication into your blood stream gradually, usually over a 12 hour period. They should be taken at regular times each day, e.g. 8.00am and 8.00pm. There are also pain relieving patches that are applied to the skin, these release the medication over a period of days.

Your medicine

When to take / apply

You may experience pain before your next dose of regular opioid is due, this is known as 'breakthrough pain'. The duration and cause of this pain will differ from person to person. You will also be prescribed a 'fast acting' or 'immediate release' opioid. This means that they act quickly (usually within 30 minutes) and last for about 4 hours.

Your medicine

When to take / apply

Take your opioids exactly as prescribed by your doctor or nurse.

Monitoring and prescriptions

It is helpful to make a note of the amount of 'breakthrough' doses you take as it helps your doctor/nurse to adjust your pain medication. You can write these down in a notebook or diary, and show it to your doctor or nurse.

Your GP, hospital doctor or nurse prescriber will provide you with prescriptions for your opioid medication. It is very important that you never run out of your medication and ensure that you get your next prescription to your pharmacy a few days in advance. When you, or a representative collect your medication a signature and identification may be requested.

Potential side effects

Drowsiness: some people feel drowsy when they first start taking opioids or after an increase in dose, but this should improve after a few days. It is advisable not to drink alcohol, and avoid driving or operating machinery if you are feeling drowsy.

Constipation: this affects most people taking opioids and it is usually necessary to take laxatives regularly. It is important for you to try to drink plenty of fluids.

Nausea or vomiting: some people experience nausea, and rarely vomiting. This should improve after a few days, but if it becomes a problem you may be prescribed anti-sickness medication.

Other side effects: less common side-effects include itching, heartburn, a change in taste of some foods and difficulty in passing urine. If you experience any of these side-effects tell your doctor or nurse.

Precautions

The following symptoms need prompt review by a doctor or nurse:

- pain gets worse or is not controlled
- feeling more sleepy than usual
- feeling sick all the time
- restless or feeling agitated
- bad dreams or hallucinations
- confusion

The doctor or nurse may need to adjust the dose of the medication, or use an alternative medication.