



Strong pain medicines (opioids)

You have been given or prescribed a strong pain medicine called an opioid. Examples include tramadol, codeine, morphine and oxycodone. This sheet explains how to use it safely.

What is it?

Opioids are strong medicines for short-term, severe pain. They work well, but they can cause drowsiness, dizziness, nausea and constipation. Too much can slow your breathing, which is dangerous. Using them for a long time can lead to dependence. They are safest at the lowest dose for the shortest time, usually only a few days.

Looking after yourself at home

- Take it only as the packet or your doctor instructs. Never take extra doses or doses closer together.
- Do not drink alcohol or take sleeping tablets, calming medicines or other strong pain medicines with it.
- Do not drive, operate machines or make important decisions while taking it.
- Use it for as short a time as possible. Stop as soon as the pain is bearable with milder medicines.
- Keep it locked away from children and others. Never share your medicine.
- Return any leftover tablets to a pharmacy. Do not keep them at home.

Medicines

- Paracetamol can be taken with it, unless your doctor told you not to. Some opioid tablets already contain paracetamol, so check the packet.
- To prevent constipation, drink plenty of water, eat fruit and vegetables, and ask the pharmacist about a gentle laxative.

Follow-up

- See your family doctor or health centre if you still need a strong pain medicine after a few days.
- Tell your doctor if you find it hard to stop taking it.

Come back to the emergency department or call an ambulance straight away if:

- Very sleepy and hard to wake up
- Slow, shallow or noisy breathing
- Blue or grey lips or fingertips
- Confusion or slurred speech
- Swelling of the face, lips or tongue, or trouble breathing after a dose
- If someone taking an opioid cannot be woken, call an ambulance



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This leaflet is general information to support the advice your doctor or nurse gave you today. It does not replace their advice. If you are worried, seek medical help.

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