

Patient Education

Opioid Pain Medicines



Your opioid pain medicine is called: _____

What are opioid pain medicines?

- **Opioid (pronounced “oh-pee-oid”)** medicines are used to help with pain. Opioids are also known as narcotics.
- These medicines may be needed while you are in hospital and/or after you return home.
- With opioids there is a fine balance between medicine that controls/relieves pain and medicine with bad side effects. The goal is to achieve a safe balance between pain control and side effects. This safe balance requires the effects and needs of your medicine to be checked on a regular.

Examples of opioid medicines:

- **Codeine** = Tylenol #1, 2, 3 or Atasol 8, 15, 30.
- **Fentanyl** = Duragesic.
- **Hydromorphone** = Dilaudid or Hyrdromorph Contin.
- **Morphine** = Statex or MS contin or M-Eslon.
- **Oxycodone** = Percocet or OxyContin or OxyNEO.
- **Tramadol** = Tramacet or Ultram or Zytram XL.

How is pain assessed?

- Pain scales (Example: from 1 to 10) are often used to help your healthcare team assess pain and monitor the effect of pain medicines.
- Only you can describe the level of pain you are feeling.

Are opioids safe?

Treatment of pain is an important part of the healing process. Many people have used opioids without any problems, but serious problems (including overdose and addiction) have occurred. It is important that we use the lowest possible dose for the shortest time possible. Some people are more sensitive to the side effects of opioids requiring a lower starting dose and/or more careful monitoring.

Being aware of signs that you are receiving too much opioid is important.

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Risks/ Precautions

- ▶ **Addiction:** Most patients are unlikely to develop an addiction if their risk for addiction is low. Patients at greatest risk are those that have a history of addiction with alcohol or drugs.
- ▶ **Withdrawal:** You will need to slowly stop the medication to avoid withdrawal symptoms such as nausea, chills and diarrhea.
- ▶ **Overdose:** You and your family should be aware of the signs of overdose (listed further in this handout).
- ▶ **Use one doctor:** Your opioid medication should be prescribed by one doctor only. If there is more than one doctor, make sure that each doctor knows all of the medications that you are taking (including other opioid medications).
- ▶ **Speak with your doctor if you interrupt your medication schedule for 3 days or more.**
- ▶ **Store medications safely:** It is important to properly store medications in a safe location that only you can access. By doing this, you are preventing causing serious harm to others who may find and take your medicine.
- ▶ **Do not drive:** Do not drive while dose is being slowly increased or if you feel tired.

Know the difference between common and dangerous side effects:

Common side effects:

These side effects can be mostly controlled by increasing your dose slowly and by using anti-nausea drugs and bowel stimulants.

- Constipation.
- Nausea/ vomiting.
- Dry Mouth.
- Itchiness/ dry skin.
- Sweating.
- Dizziness/ drowsiness.

**Contact your healthcare team if your side effects are hard to manage.

Dangerous side effects – Contact doctor immediately if you experience:

- Severe dizziness.
- Inability to stay awake.
- Hallucinations.
- Heavy or unusual snoring.
- Slow breathing rate.

**** Do not take any more opioid medicine and contact your healthcare team right way.**



What to expect while taking opioid medicines in the hospital

- ✓ A nurse will ask about your pain level before each dose.
- ✓ A nurse will return (within about an hour) to check how you are feeling after a dose of opioid and ask about your pain level, checking your breathing.
- ✓ Throughout the day/night a nurse will re-check pain level, sleepiness, breathing and other vital signs.

Use your call bell for immediate help while in the hospital

If you feel:

- Very dizzy.
- Very weak.
- You are having hallucinations.
- Your heart rate is slow or unusual.

OR

If family members observe:

- You are confused or cannot speak.
- It is hard to wake you up.
- Your lips or fingernails are darkening in colour.
- You are making unusual heavy snoring, gasping, gurgling or snorting sounds while sleeping.
- You are becoming upset/ crying easily.
- You have poor balance.

Know the
signs of
OVERDOSE



What to expect at home after receiving opioid medicines

- ✓ Be aware of problem signs with your opioid dose after you go home.

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- ✓ Understand the plan for pain control before you leave the hospital.
- ✓ Work closely with your doctor if you are to take opioids for more than a few weeks after leaving the hospital.
- ✓ Never share your opioid medicine that was prescribed for you and you only.
- ✓ Take unused opioids back to your pharmacy for safe disposal.

Your family member or caregiver needs to call 911 if:

- You are confused or cannot speak.
- It is hard to wake you up / you cannot wake up.
- Your lips or fingernails are darkening in colour.
- You are making unusual heavy snoring, gasping, gurgling or snorting sounds while sleeping.

Stop taking your opioid medicine and contact your doctor that day if you:

- Too sleepy to participate in normal activities
(Example: you fall asleep while eating).
- Very dizzy.
- Very weak.
- You are having hallucinations.
- Your heart rate is slow or unusual.
- You are becoming upset/ crying easily.
- You have poor balance.



****If your doctor is not available, please go to the nearest Emergency Department.**

The information in this handout was adapted from 2013 Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada's Information for Patients and Families Opioid Pain Medicines and McMaster University's "Guideline for Safe and Effective Use of Opioids for Chronic Non-Cancer Pain" information sheet.

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