

Stopping Your Medicine: Opioids for Long-Term Pain

What are opioids and why are they used?

Opioids are very strong pain medicines. Doctors use them to help people who have:

- ◆ Pain after surgery
- ◆ A serious injury
- ◆ Cancer-related pain

Opioids work by blocking pain messages in the brain and spinal cord. They are **very good for short-term pain** and for cancer pain.

Doctors used to think opioids also helped with **persistent pain** (pain lasting more than 3 months). Now we know they **don't work well** for this type of long-term pain.

Most long-term pain cannot be completely cured, but people can still feel better by using **self-management**, such as gentle exercise, learning new coping skills, and talking therapies.

What are the long-term risks of taking opioids?

Opioids may cause significant problems, which include:

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| ◆ Falls | ◆ Weight gain |
| ◆ Confusion or memory problems | ◆ Trouble sleeping |
| ◆ Low sex drive | ◆ Breathing problems at night |
| ◆ More pain instead of less | ◆ Addiction or dependence |
| ◆ Withdrawal symptoms | ◆ Death (in very serious cases) |
| ◆ Unsafe driving | |



What are the benefits of stopping opioids?

If you've been taking opioids for a long time and they're not helping your pain, talk to your doctor about stopping them safely.

When people stop opioids, they often:

- ◆ Feel more awake and able to focus
- ◆ Are less likely to have accidents
- ◆ Sleep better and feel less tired
- ◆ Notice their mood improving



Self-management

Self-management means finding ways to make pain a **smaller part of your life**, so you can enjoy more of the things that matter to you.

Helpful ideas include:

- ◆ **Better sleep:** Poor sleep can make pain feel worse
- ◆ **Retraining your brain:** You can learn ways to help your brain "turn down" the pain
- ◆ **Acceptance:** Learning to live with pain is hard, but it can help over time
- ◆ **Useful website:** *Live Well With Pain* has lots of tools and ideas to help people manage pain: livewellwithpain.co.uk

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How should I stop taking opioid medicine?

1. Don't stop suddenly

It's important **not** to stop taking opioid medicine all at once. A doctor, pharmacist or nurse needs to help plan a **slow and steady** reduction. Everyone is different, so some people reduce their dose faster and others more slowly. The key is to go at a pace that feels comfortable and safe.

2. Make a plan with a healthcare professional

A doctor, pharmacist or nurse will explain **how** to reduce the dose and talk about other ways to manage pain. Many people find that reducing the dose every **two to four weeks** works well, but everyone can find the timing that suits them best.

3. Use the self-care advice your doctor gives you

The Good Relaxation and Sleep Guide – helps with stress, worry and building a healthy sleep routine.

- The Good Sleep Guide: tinyurl.com/9udtkcm6
- The Good Relaxation Guide: tinyurl.com/y95jhfxc

Ten Footsteps – ideas for living well with long-term pain: tinyurl.com/8a68e5ha

Regular exercise – gentle movement can help with pain

Movement Matters videos from Rethinking Pain – safe ways to move with long-term pain: tinyurl.com/a44p9j7p

myrecovery app – videos and exercises to help manage joint or muscle pain: tinyurl.com/yf2heh7c

4. Keep a diary

Writing down how things are going can help someone see their progress. This can boost confidence and make it easier to keep going.

5. Don't give up!

When people start reducing their dose, they often feel better and can do more everyday activities.

But it's normal to have a **tough patch** at some point. If that happens, staying on the same dose for a while can help until things settle.

Any reduction, even a small one, is still a positive step.

6. Know about possible withdrawal symptoms

Reducing the medicine slowly makes withdrawal symptoms less likely, but some people may still notice:

- ◆ Aches and pains
- ◆ Blocked or runny nose
- ◆ Tummy or bowel problems
- ◆ Trouble sleeping
- ◆ Feeling restless or irritated
- ◆ Feeling anxious

These usually last only a few days or weeks. If someone is struggling, they should talk to their doctor, nurse or pharmacist for support.

These symptoms usually pass with time.

Keep going, you're doing something important for your health - good luck!

Adapted from Live Well with Pain and All Wales Medicines Strategy Group: Hypnotic and Anxiolytic reduction or withdrawal resources with permission and thanks.