

Understanding Opioids and How to Reduce or Stop Taking Them

Why might someone need to reduce or stop taking opioids?

Opioids are very strong pain medicines. They can help a lot when someone has short-term pain, like after an operation or if they break a bone. This kind of pain usually lasts only a few days or weeks.

But some people have long-term pain that goes on for months or even years. Doctors used to think opioids helped with this kind of pain too - but now we know they don't work well for long-term pain.

Even more important, taking opioids for a long time can be unsafe. It can cause unpleasant side effects, the body becoming dependent on the medicine and dying sooner than expected.

Some strong pain medicines, like oxycodone and fentanyl, are even stronger than morphine. Doctors say that people who have pain for a long time should not take more than **90mg of morphine or an equivalent dose per day** as this is associated with increasing harm. This equivalent dose is called the **oral morphine equivalent dose, or OMED**. A doctor or pharmacist can work out how much morphine or an equivalent dose you are taking. Doses above 50mg OMED are not likely to give much more pain relief, and doctors should check them often to make sure they are not causing harm.

The Opioid Thermometer is a picture that helps show when taking too much of an opioid medicine can be unsafe. You can see it here: https://tinyurl.com/3n4y_cb6c.

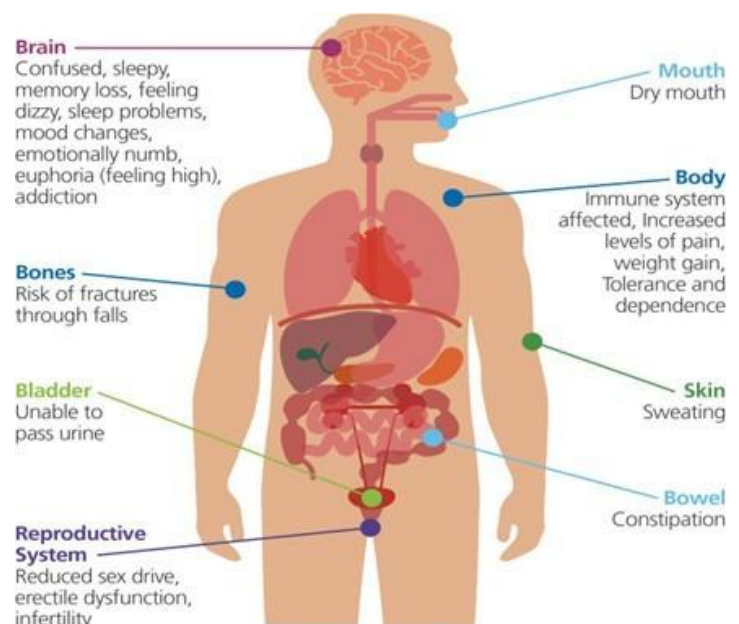
Side effects of opioids

When someone takes opioid medicine, it can affect lots of different parts of the body at the same time.

Becoming more sensitive to pain:

If you take opioids for a long time, they can sometimes make your body more sensitive to pain. This means:

- Even light touches, like clothes brushing against the skin, might feel sore
- Things that normally hurt a little might hurt a lot



Instead of helping your pain, the medicine can make your body react more strongly to it.

Only reduce or stop taking opioids with the help of your doctor, who will guide you safely.

Tolerance, dependence and addiction

Tolerance

Sometimes the body gets used to a medicine. This means the medicine doesn't work as well as it used to, even if the person takes the same amount. That's called tolerance.

Dependence

If someone takes opioids for a long time, their body can start to depend on them. Then, if they stop suddenly, they might feel unwell. These uncomfortable feelings are called withdrawal symptoms.

Addiction

A small number of people can become addicted to opioids. This means they might:

- Really want the medicine (craving)
- Feel like they need more than the doctor said
- Keep taking it even if it's not helping their pain
- Take it for reasons other than pain, like to feel calm or to help them sleep
- Feel unwell if they stop suddenly

Addiction can happen slowly, and it can make someone feel like they're not in control of how much medicine they take.

If someone's pain is hard to manage or they're worried about how they're using their medicine, they should talk to their doctor, who can help.

Driving and opioids

Some adults take opioids for pain, but these medicines can make it harder and less safe to drive.

Why driving can be unsafe

Opioids can slow down:

- How fast someone reacts
- How quickly they make decisions
- How well they judge distance or speed

This means a person might not be able to drive safely.

If someone takes opioids and other medicines that make them sleepy - like some anxiety, nerve, or pain medicines — driving becomes even more dangerous. Even some everyday medicines bought in a shop can affect driving.

Alcohol + opioids = unsafe

Drinking alcohol while taking opioids makes driving much more dangerous, so adults should never drive if they've had both.

When starting or changing the dose

When someone first starts taking opioids, or when their dose changes, it's not safe to drive for a few days because their body is still getting used to the medicine.

Want to know more?

There's a government website that explains the rules about driving and medicines:

<https://tinyurl.com/yk7hhbs3>.

What can help when someone is reducing their opioids?

Doctors help people slowly lower the amount of opioid medicine they take. Doing it slowly makes it much easier and helps prevent the person from feeling too unwell.

How someone might feel

When the dose is reduced, a person might have some withdrawal symptoms, such as:

- Feeling shivery or sweaty
- Tummy cramps or diarrhoea
- Trouble sleeping
- More pain for a short time
- Achy muscles
- Feeling grumpy or annoyed
- Feeling worried or sad
- Feeling sick or being sick

If someone feels like this, they should talk to their doctor, nurse or pharmacist, who can help.

Things that can make it easier

These uncomfortable feelings usually don't last long. Some things that can help include:

- Listening to music
- Watching a film or reading a book
- Going for a gentle walk
- Doing something fun to distract yourself
- Having small snacks or drinks if you don't feel like eating much
- Keeping hydrated

Support matters

The most important thing is having support from family, friends or carers. Stopping opioids can be a big change, and it helps when the people around you understand and encourage you.

Even after someone stops taking opioids completely, it can take 4–6 months to feel fully back to normal, so support is still important during that time.

Professionals who can help

Doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other healthcare workers can help with:

- Long-term pain management
- Self-care ideas
- Ways to cope without strong medicines

Reducing opioids slowly and safely often helps people feel better overall - with improved mood, better daily functioning and sometimes even less pain.

Useful resources

Doing everyday activities, keeping your body as healthy as you can, and finding ways to relax can all help make pain feel easier to cope with. Feeling calm and looking after your mental health can make a big difference too.

There are lots of websites, videos and tools that can help people learn how to manage pain and feel better in their daily life. These resources can give ideas for staying active, reducing stress and understanding pain.

For any medical worries or questions, it's always important to talk to a doctor.

MHRA Patient Safety Leaflet on opioids and the risk of addiction:

<https://tinyurl.com/2ja2yv5x>

The Pain Toolkit:

This gives practical advice and techniques to help manage pain -

<https://tinyurl.com/nt6zuc9a>

Live Well with Pain:

This site offers resources for patients exploring medication use, medication reviews, behaviour change and opioid prescribing. It includes Ten Footsteps towards supporting you to live well with pain, and is also available as an online interactive guide or a leaflet - <https://tinyurl.com/35u9wbw8>

Flippin' Pain:

This is a public health campaign with a goal to change the way we think about, talk about and treat persistent pain. Website includes patient leaflets, videos, podcasts, Ted Talks, booklets for both patients and clinicians - <https://tinyurl.com/7x5er3r2>

British Pain Society:

Helpful information section for patients with pain conditions, and details of various support groups - <https://tinyurl.com/45n9ctsy>

World Health Organisation about Depression:

<https://tinyurl.com/4c3czv8j>

'Brainman':

A five-minute explanation of chronic pain. There is a follow-up video about strategies to help reduce opioids: 'Brainman stops his opioids' - <https://tinyurl.com/4vkwmyc6>

Dr Mike Evans on Stress Management:

<https://tinyurl.com/ytybbash>

NHS Ayrshire & Arran video explaining opioid induced hypersensitivity (Opioid Induced Hyperalgesia):

<https://tinyurl.com/3er265vf>

Action for Happiness:

Charity organisation with people taking action to create a happier and kinder world, together - <https://tinyurl.com/35mnzyy7>

Pain Trainer:

This is an online free Pain Management Programme from Australia that helps teach effective strategies to manage your pain - <https://tinyurl.com/t6a5ac35>

NHS Fife Jigsaw:

Toolkit with information on specific areas of self-management - <https://tinyurl.com/49t8uud2>

Pain Concern:

This offers resources to support and inform people living with pain, including a: helpline; network forum; radio channel called Airing Pain; and a Self-Management Navigator Tool which can help you to recognise all the different ways in which pain affects you - <https://tinyurl.com/fb6r5pmn>

NHS Chronic Pain Self-management:

Includes advice on the importance of keeping active; links to different exercises (including chair exercises); pain medication; and a 20-minute guided meditation proven to help people cope with chronic pain - <https://tinyurl.com/a8c86r3e> and <https://tinyurl.com/3pmuvrj3>

ESCAPE-pain:

Is a group rehabilitation programme for people with chronic joint pain that integrates educational self-management and coping strategies with an exercise regimen individualised for each participant - <https://tinyurl.com/5de2dmfn>

Rethinking Pain:

This is a useful website which has developed a series of Movement Matters videos for people who live with long-term pain, to support them to move more in ways that feel safe - <https://tinyurl.com/a44p9j7p>

Shropshire Telford and Wrekin Integrated Care Board, Pain Management Resources information and tools for managing chronic & acute pain (the resources can be viewed when you click 'Useful information Support Services') - <https://tinyurl.com/y57yv5pc>

Apps**myrecovery:**

An app designed by Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin HealthCare Providers that provides videos, information and exercises to help patients self-manage their joint or muscle pain. Register here: <https://tinyurl.com/yf2heh7c>

Mindfulness:

<https://tinyurl.com/yb9px9f4>

Better Health:

<https://tinyurl.com/ysp7x4d6>

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