Opioids
Information for patients and carers

Opioids (sometimes known as opiates) are one of many types of medicines available to help relieve pain. Your Doctor or other Healthcare Professional who is a prescriber will prescribe them if they feel it is the best way to control your pain. This short leaflet is designed to help you understand more about your medication.

What is an opioid?

Opioids refer to morphine and "morphine-type" medicines and are very strong painkillers that have been used to relieve pain for many years.

They include:

- weak opioids such as codeine, tramadol and dihydrocodeine,
- strong opioids such as morphine, diamorphine, oxycodone, fentanyl and buprenorphine.

Opioids are available as tablets, liquids, suppositories, patches applied to the skin and injections.

How do they work?

Pain signals are transmitted from the nerves of the body through the spinal cord to the brain. Opioids act on areas in the spinal cord and brain to block some of these pain signals. Opioids can help with many types of pain but not all so they may be used alongside other types of pain medication that works in different ways.

Which is the right opioid for me?

The choice of which opioid is based on 2 main factors:

1. **How severe is the pain?**
   Some opioids are stronger than others, but the strength also depends on the dose. If an opioid fails to relieve pain your Prescriber might need to increase the dose or may change it to see if a different medicine is more effective.

2. **How is the medication administered?**
   The route of administration depends both on the opioid and on the condition of the patient. Some people may not be able to take medication by mouth so may benefit from patches. Opioids can be given by subcutaneous injection which means an injection into the tissues under the skin. This can be as repeated injections or as a continuous infusion via a device known as a syringe driver.

compassionate care

Will I become addicted to opioids?

It is very unusual to become physically dependent on opioids when they are being taken either as a short course for acute pain or for a long term condition needing pain relief. However, when taken for several weeks or months your body may become used to the medication which means, if you stop taking it suddenly, you may experience symptoms of withdrawal for example stomach cramps, diarrhoea and sweating. When taking opioids for a long term, chronic condition you should not stop taking your medication unless your medical team ask you to do so.

What side effects am I likely to experience from opioids?

When you start taking opioids or when your dose is increased you may notice the following side effects:

- Constipation-this is common and you will probably need to take a regular laxative.
- Nausea-usually occurs during the first few days of treatment but should then settle within a week. Anti-sickness medication can be taken to help with this.
- Drowsiness - this usually wears off after a few days as your body gets used to the medication.
- Itching - your Prescriber may want to change the type of opioid or prescribe an anti-histamine to help.
- Dry mouth-artificial saliva products may help.

Please tell your Prescriber as soon as possible if you experience any of the following:

- More muddled thoughts
- Feeling more sick than usual
- Feeling restless or jumpy
- Bad dreams or hallucinations

Your Prescriber may reduce your dose of opioid and/or suggest other treatments for your pain.

What is breakthrough pain?

Despite taking regular medicines you can occasionally experience pain. This is called breakthrough pain which can last for minutes to hours. It can occur for no apparent reason or may be brought on by a particular activity e.g. standing or walking. Your Prescriber will prescribe a short acting opioid for this type of pain.

It is important that you tell your medical team about any episodes of breakthrough pain so adjustments can be made to either your long acting or short acting pain medicines.

If you know something specific triggers your breakthrough pain you should take your short acting opioid before the trigger event to try to prevent the pain occurring. Your Prescriber can advise you how long in advance you should take it.

If your pain is unpredictable you should take your breakthrough medication as soon as possible as it may take some time for it to start working.

If your pain is not controlled speak to your Prescriber.

Why have I been prescribed TWO opioid medicines for pain?

It is important to control background pain and also to make sure you have extra medicine for breakthrough pain.

- Long acting opioids (e.g. modified release morphine or oxycodone) take a few hours to start reducing pain and last 12-24 hours depending on the product prescribed. Patches may also be used and these can last for 3-7 days depending on the type of patch. These medicines help control your background pain so you must take them regularly to prevent pain recurring.

- Short acting opioids (immediate release morphine or oxycodone) act quickly but usually wear off within a few hours and are taken when you have pain in between your regular (long acting) opioid medicine.

Can I drink alcohol when taking opioids?

Both alcohol and opioids can cause sleepiness, poor concentration and increased reaction times. You should avoid alcohol when you first start taking an opioid or if the dose has just been increased. Taking opioids may make you more sensitive to the effects of alcohol and so alcohol should be avoided if you are going to operate any tools.

Can I continue to drive while taking opioids?

When you first start taking opioids you may feel drowsy. It is important you do not drive if drowsy. Do not drive if your dose has recently been increased. You must wait until this side effect has passed before driving. Do not drive soon after taking a breakthrough dose as this may also make you drowsy. You must wait then reassess if you feel fit to drive. Your medical team may have told you that you are fit to drive but it is your responsibility to decide whether you are fit to drive on each occasion.

How should I store opioids at home?

- Keep them in their original child-proof containers, clearly labelled, preferably in a locked cupboard out of the reach and sight of children.

- Store at room temperature in a dry place.

- Check with your pharmacist if you are unsure.

What do I do with unused opioids?

Unused opioids should be returned to a pharmacy for safe disposal. Do not flush them down the toilet or

throw them away.

What do I do when I am Travelling abroad?

If you are travelling to a Schengen country (European states that have officially abolished all passport and all other types of border control at their mutual borders) and want to take medicines with you that fall under the Opium Act, you will need to have a Schengen certificate. If you are travelling to a country outside the Schengen area, you will need a medical certificate. If you take these medicines with you without going through the necessary procedures, you may be in violation of local law and risk a severe penalty. So you should always ask the embassy of the country that you are travelling to what the local requirements are.

Medicines that fall under the Opium Act

Examples of medicines that fall under the Opium Act are:

- strong painkillers;
- sleeping pills and drugs to reduce anxiety, such as Valium;
- medication for ADHD, such as Ritalin or Concerta;
- medicinal cannabis.

Ask your pharmacist if your medicine falls under the Opium Act, or consult lists I and II of the Opium Act yourself. These only list the active ingredients, or international non-proprietary name (INN). Heavy painkillers and ADHD medication are on List I. Sleeping pills and drugs to reduce anxiety are on List II.

Schengen certificate for medication

If you or your child is travelling to a Schengen country with medicines that fall under the Opium Act, you will need a Schengen certificate. The certificate, which must be signed by your doctor, states that the medicine is required for your own or your child's medical use. The certificate is then checked and declared legally valid by the Central Administrative Office (CAK).

The Schengen certificate is valid for 30 days. If you are going away for more than 30 days, you must have multiple, successive Schengen certificates.

One Schengen certificate for several Schengen countries, or a medical certificate.

A Schengen certificate is valid for travel in up to four Schengen countries.

If you are going to be passing through Schengen countries to a destination outside the Schengen area, you will only need a medical certificate, written in English. The medical certificate is also valid in the Schengen countries.

Applying for a Schengen certificate for medication

You can download the Schengen certificate application form (Pdf 80,8 kB) from the CAK website. The CAK website explains what the procedure is for each country. Allow up to 4 weeks for your application to be processed.

Summary

Opioids are a group of medicines which are most often used to relieve pain but can also relieve breathlessness or persistent cough. When used appropriately they are very safe and effective. If side effects occur they can almost always be treated successfully. If you still have questions after reading this leaflet, please speak to your Prescriber who will aim to provide you with as much information and advice as possible.

If you have any comments about this leaflet you can contact :

Pharmacist
Calderdale Royal Hospital

Telephone No: 01422 223835

If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

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