



The problem with opioids and persistent pain

What are opioids and how do they work?

Opioids are a group of medicines taken for pain. Some come from plants and some are made in a laboratory. They work by attaching to parts of the nervous system. They can provide pain relief by blocking pain signals in the brain and spinal cord. Opioids can be helpful for short-term pain relief, for example, after surgery or an injury.

"I used to think that my opioids were helping me. I needed to think that. What else is there? But the reality is that they don't help and any effect for me was pure placebo (nothing wrong with that but you don't need the drug for the effect!) and the side effects were horrendous. And still are."

Discussion forum participant, female, 47 years old and lived with pain for 31 years

Why don't opioid medicines work well for persistent pain?

We now know that opioids don't work well for most people with persistent pain. Persistent pain is complex and influenced by many factors. Opioid medicines only interact with one part of this very complex system.

Opioid medicines often seem helpful at first but you can get used to them. This means you notice less and less benefit as time goes on, which is called building up "tolerance". Increasing the dose of opioids is unlikely to give better pain relief in the long-term, and is likely to cause more unwanted side-effects and other problems.

What problems can opioids cause?

Opioids can cause a number of unwanted side-effects that interfere with quality of life and wellbeing.

Scientists have discovered that people taking regular opioids long-term are more likely to fall, have lower sex drive, be more prone to infections, and have poorer quality sleep.

You can become physically dependent on opioid medicines. This means that if you run out of medicine, stop taking the drug suddenly, or lower the dose too quickly, you can get withdrawal symptoms.

The majority of people taking opioids for chronic pain do not become addicted even though they may be physically dependent on them. Around 1 in 10 may show signs of addiction to the opioid medicines they take for pain.

"Opioids make me feel spacey and drugged up while taking them and will last for a few days after. They leave me feeling utterly miserable and run down"

Discussion forum participant

"I absolutely hate the hallucinations and the fuzzy feeling of being on opioid meds - I need my imagination and intellect intact for what few jobs I can do!"

Discussion forum participant, male, lived with pain for unknown, but >8 years

Common side-effects of opioids can include...

... feeling sick, feeling dizzy, daytime sleepiness, confusion, constipation, itching, sweating and weight gain

Withdrawal symptoms can include...

... worse pain, tiredness, restlessness, sweating, aching muscles, diarrhoea, stomach cramps and a runny nose.

Signs of addiction can include...

... cravings for opioids

... feeling out of control about how much, or how often opioids medicine is taken

...continuing to take the medicine even when it has a negative effect on physical or mental health

How can I test whether opioids are still helping me?

If you have been taking opioid medicines regularly, do not stop taking your opioid suddenly, otherwise you may experience withdrawal symptoms.

The best way to find out whether opioids are still helping you is by gradually reducing the dose.

A slow reduction will avoid withdrawal symptoms and allow you to find out how much opioids are really helping you. Your clinical pharmacist can advise how best to do this.

“I didn't realise I was suffering side effects until I stopped taking it...I'd had stomach problems and constipation, my concentration was now better, I wasn't drowsy and I felt clear headed again. Oh, and I wasn't in anymore pain so clearly it hadn't been working.”

Discussion forum participant, female, 47 years old, lived with pain for over 20 years

“Then about 18 months ago due to new information about opioids I decided to taper off my drugs and see how I coped.” *Discussion forum participant, female, 47 years old, lived with pain for over 20 years*

For more information about what to expect in the first few weeks of reducing opioid medicines, and some tips on how to cope, click [here](#), or ask your clinical pharmacist for a copy of a leaflet by this title.