



# Strong Opioids

## What are strong opioids?

Strong opioids are powerful medicines used to control pain that has not been controlled by weaker medicines. They might be used after surgery or for life limiting conditions such as cancer. They can also be prescribed to relieve a cough or breathlessness

There are three main types of strong opioids:

- Quick acting:  
Such as Oramorph, Sevredol or Oxynorm
- Slow acting:  
Such as Zomorph, MST or Oxycontin
- Patches:  
Such as Fentanyl/Butrans

You will usually be prescribed a slow acting opioid, which is released gradually day and night. Each dose lasts for 12 hours, so you need to take those 12 hours apart (for example 9am and 9pm). This is to treat the pain you have all the time.

If you forget to take a dose, take it as soon as you remember and then take the next dose 12 hours later. Do not take a double dose. You may need some of your breakthrough medication to help during this time.

**Your prescribed strong opioid is:** .....

**You need to take it:** .....

## Break - through pain

You may experience pain, known as break-through pain, before your next dose of the slow acting opioid.



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The cause and duration of this type of pain varies. To help manage this, you will be prescribed a faster acting opioid that will work within 30-60 minutes and usually lasts for up to four hours. If the pain has not gone after an hour a second dose can be taken. If you need more than two to three extra doses in 24 hours please tell your nurse or doctor.

It is helpful to record the amount of break-through doses you require as it helps us adjust your medication more accurately.

**Your prescribed Break-through Opioid is:** .....

**You need to take it:** .....

## Does this mean I am at the end of my life?

No. The right time to start taking strong opioids is the time when you have pain that is bad enough to need them. This is not affected by how long you are going to live. You will be able to continue to take this medication for as long as it is needed.

## Are there any side effects?

**Drowsiness:** You may feel drowsy for a few days after starting strong opioids or following an increase in dose. If it affects you it is advisable not to drive or operate dangerous machinery.

**Sickness:** Some people may feel sick and may vomit after starting strong opioids or after an increased dose. This usually settles within two weeks. You can try taking your medication with food or asking for an anti-sickness tablet.

**Constipation:** This affects almost everyone taking strong opioids and you will normally be prescribed a laxative to prevent constipation becoming a problem. It is important to drink plenty of fluids and eating fruit and vegetables will help.

**Other side effects:** Itching, heartburn, change in taste, nightmares or hallucinations and difficulty passing urine. These are less common but if you experience any of these please tell your healthcare professional.

## Will I become addicted?

When strong opioids are used for pain control there is no evidence to suggest that you will become addicted.



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## Can I drive?

Taking strong opioids does not automatically mean you cannot drive. It is important not to drive when you are drowsy.

## Can I drink alcohol?

Strong opioids and alcohol make you feel more sleepy or drunk much sooner than normal. It is advisable to drink less than you normally would until you know the effect it will have.

## Prescriptions

Order these from your General Practitioner in good time so that they do not run out. Also, order after any dose changes.

## Will strong opioids always relieve my pain?

Although strong opioids are very good pain killers they are not helpful for all types of pain. Your doctor or nurse will suggest other treatments that may help.

## When to seek Medical Advice

If you experience one or more of these:

- Your pain gets worse and is not controlled with current medication
- You become more drowsy or sleepy than usual
- You have been sick for more than 24 hours
- You feel more confused or not quite yourself
- You experience hallucinations or bad dreams
- You feel restless
- You take too much.

## Useful contacts:

Community Nurse: 08:00am – 10.00pm Tel: 01793 646436  
10.00pm – 08:00am Tel: 111

Prospect Hospice: 01793 813355



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## Storage

Keep your medications in the original packaging, in a cool, dry, safe place out of the sight and reach of children.

## Unused medication

Always return all unused medication in its original packaging to the Pharmacist for safe disposal. Do not flush them down the toilet or throw them away.

From 1st January 2019 smoking will not be permitted on any NHS site in England. Smoking will not be permitted within any of our buildings or anywhere outside on our sites. Smoking facilities will not be provided. Please be considerate of others when vaping in hospital grounds.

**This information sheet is available to order in other languages and formats. If you would like a copy, please contact us on 01793 604031 or email [gwh.pals@nhs.net](mailto:gwh.pals@nhs.net)**

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