

Risks of high-dose opioid medicines

Opioids beyond a certain dose are now recognised as being more harmful than helpful, and the risks of long-term or high-dose opioids can be very serious.

A lower, safer dose can help you feel less pain and improve your wellbeing, and you do have alternatives to taking opioids. Your doctor can help you manage your pain with a range of techniques, including exercise, physiotherapy and meditation.

Can opioid medicines be harmful?

If you are taking opioids and are not achieving an improvement in your pain or activity level despite increasing your dose, or if you experience side effects that affect your day-to-day activities, your doctor needs to review your pain management.

Opioids in high doses may be more harmful than helpful for your pain, and a higher dose may create a higher level of risk. Because of this, your doctor may have suggested you reduce your dose, as clinical guidelines now recommend gradual reduction to a safer level. You may be worried about reducing your dose and that your pain will get worse, but your doctor is acting in your best interest and will work closely with you to manage your pain with other treatment options.

What are the risks of long-term or high-dose opioids?

1. **Serious bodily harm, overdose or death.**

Overdose means your thinking and breathing slows down, your speech is slurred and you may stagger when you walk. **You need to see your health professional urgently if you experience any of these symptoms.**

2. **Increased pain levels.** With higher doses you can become more sensitive to pain. This is the result of a change in your brain from long-term use. Increasing your dose does not improve your pain, and increases your risk of dependence or other harm.

3. **Increased risk of physical dependence.** Physical dependence means your body has adapted to the medicine and may experience withdrawal symptoms.

4. **Drowsiness.** This affects your ability to think clearly and can impact on your ability to drive safely.

5. **Hormone changes.** These affect your sex drive.

6. **Decreased immune function.** Long-term treatment reduces the activity of your immune system, increasing your risk of infection.

7. **Poor muscle tone.** The drowsiness and increased sensitivity to pain resulting from taking opioids impacts your ability to exercise, resulting in poor muscle tone which affects your posture and stability.

8. **Increased risk of falls and fractures.** Long-term or high-dose treatment increases your risk of falls and fractures.

9. **Depression.** You have an increased risk of depression on high-dose opioids. Depression can affect your ability to cope with your pain.

10. **Dry mouth.** Lack of saliva increases the risk of dental caries and tooth loss.

Are there alternatives to opioid medicines?

Yes. Non-opioid medicines or non-drug therapies can improve your overall pain control, general health and wellbeing and help you reduce your dose of opioid medicines to a safer level. If you are prescribed non-opioid pain medicines, take these regularly as prescribed to manage your pain.

What are the benefits of reducing your dose?

You may experience less pain and improve your activity level, mood, and ability to think clearly. You will not be so drowsy and will feel safer to drive. You will also have the energy to participate gradually in more activities, which in turn can improve your pain level. Reducing your dose also reduces your risk of serious side effects, such as overdose, dependence, hormone changes and depression.

What is involved in reducing your dose?

Your doctor can tailor a treatment plan to gradually reduce your dose to safer levels according to your circumstances. The doctor will review your progress regularly and ask about your pain, mood and alertness, to adjust your dose appropriately.

Your doctor will give you a prescription for the right amount of medicine to last until your next appointment. Keep your prescription safe and take your medicines as instructed. Tell your doctor if you are taking any extra or new medicines.

For your safety, your doctor may ask you to sign an opioid treatment plan which will outline the gradual reduction of your dose to a safer level, usually over a few weeks or months.

You may be asked for a urine sample during dose reduction, to ensure that you are not taking an unsafe combination of medicines.

What about withdrawal symptoms?

Your doctor will work closely with you to check any withdrawal symptoms. These are usually the opposite of the effects of the medicine, for example if the medicine causes constipation, the withdrawal symptom will be diarrhoea. Withdrawal symptoms are flu-like and include nausea, diarrhoea, chills, stomach aches, and muscle pains. They are temporary and usually not dangerous. Withdrawal symptoms do not mean you are addicted, just that your body is adjusting to the reduced dose.

Withdrawal symptoms can be safely managed by your doctor, who will regularly adjust the dose according to the withdrawal symptoms you experience. You may also be prescribed medicine to help manage the withdrawal symptoms.

Are there other ways to manage pain?

Medicine is only one option in managing your pain. There is strong evidence that pain is influenced not just by physical factors, but by psychological, social or environmental factors as well.

Pain management can include exercise, physiotherapy, psychological counselling, meditation and other non-medicine approaches. These treatments involve you taking an active role in managing your pain day to day. They can help reduce pain-related disability and improve your physical function and wellbeing. Talk about these options with your doctor, who may be able to help tailor a Medicare-funded Care Plan to suit your specific needs.

You can also find a wide range of helpful information and resources at www.painaustralia.org.au.