



# BUPRENORPHINE (SUBUTEX™)

## About buprenorphine

Buprenorphine is used to treat addiction to heroin, morphine, pethidine, codeine or oxycodone. It is a crushed tablet taken under the tongue.

Buprenorphine has been available in Australia since 2000. It is an alternative treatment to **methadone opiate substitution therapy**.

Buprenorphine is longer acting than most other opiates and therefore can be taken once a day or every two days. During pregnancy, a daily dosage is recommended to provide a more stable environment for you and your baby. When you are on the correct dose of buprenorphine, it will stop you, and therefore your baby, from experiencing withdrawal symptoms and cravings. This is very important for your unborn baby's health.

If you are using heroin or other opiates and experiencing physical withdrawal symptoms when you do not use, methadone or buprenorphine stabilisation is recommended.

Buprenorphine (or methadone) should be started as soon as possible after your pregnancy has been confirmed, or continued if you are already on a buprenorphine program. However, if you are on a high dose of buprenorphine at the start of pregnancy, your doctor may advise changing your treatment to methadone since the dose of your medication will need to be increased during the pregnancy. The maximum dose of buprenorphine is 32mg and higher doses have no further benefits.

You can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of methadone or buprenorphine treatment with your health professional. This will help you to make an informed decision about management during your pregnancy. An inpatient methadone or buprenorphine stabilisation program is available at the Royal Women's Hospital and through some Drug and Alcohol detoxification (detox) units. Ask your doctor or midwife about this program.

Withdrawal from methadone, buprenorphine, prescription opiates or heroin 'cold turkey' is strongly discouraged during pregnancy. This is due to the risk of miscarriage, premature labour, fetal death and possible return to dependent heroin/opiate use.

Suboxone, which is buprenorphine and naloxone, is not recommended in pregnancy as the effects on the unborn baby are not known.

If you are on Suboxone and become pregnant, you need to see your doctor to discuss changing to buprenorphine. This should be very simple and not cause any withdrawal symptoms.

## Effects on pregnancy

Buprenorphine is safe to use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Buprenorphine does not increase the risk of congenital abnormalities in infants. It has been shown to improve pregnancy outcomes for women who are addicted to opiates.

The benefits of buprenorphine are:

- » stabilisation of drug use and lifestyle
- » providing a stable environment in your body for your baby, which can improve the health and growth of your baby
- » reduced risk of blood borne viral infections including Hepatitis C and HIV

## Counselling in pregnancy

Counselling can help you to get access to a buprenorphine or methadone treatment program. It can also help you avoid relapsing and returning drug use. Counselling can also help you to stay on the program after your baby is born.

## Pregnancy care

All pregnant women have pregnancy care with a doctor or midwife. These are regular visits, which vary at different stages in the pregnancy. The number of visits you have will depend on your particular needs. Pregnancy care is very important to make sure that you are healthy and your baby is growing well. Routine investigations such as blood tests, ultrasounds and a health screen are included in pregnancy care.

Your dose of buprenorphine usually needs to be increased during pregnancy, especially in the later months. This is due to a number of things, such as:

- » increased volume of fluid in your body
- » the drug is breaking down or being metabolised faster by the placenta and fetus
- » your kidneys are excreting more or removing the by-products of methadone from your body through urine.

You may need dietary supplements such as iron and calcium during your pregnancy. All women should take folate before conceiving and for at least the first three months of their pregnancy.

Eating well during pregnancy and whilst you are breastfeeding is important for the health of you and your baby. Good dental care is important for all pregnant women.

## Breastfeeding

If you are stable on buprenorphine, then breastfeeding is usually encouraged. The amount of buprenorphine excreted in breast milk is very small and unlikely to have any adverse effect on your baby. If you plan to stop breastfeeding your baby, you will need to do so slowly and with support from your maternal and child health nurse (MCHN). If you stop breastfeeding suddenly, you are withdrawing the small amount of buprenorphine the baby is getting through breast milk and they may have withdrawal symptoms.

Do not breastfeed your baby if you are using heroin or 'ice', or if you are HIV positive.

## Your baby's care after the birth

A doctor will check your baby after the birth.

When you have been a regular user of opiates (including buprenorphine) during pregnancy, your baby is at risk of developing Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) or infant withdrawal.

NAS is a condition which can be treated safely and effectively. It is not possible to reliably predict before birth which babies will develop NAS. NAS is not related to your dose of buprenorphine but if you are using other drugs as well as buprenorphine such as heroin, crystal methamphetamine ('ice') or benzodiazepines ('benzo's'), your baby is more likely to need medication to help them through their withdrawal.

Most babies will show some signs of withdrawal and will need to stay in hospital for five to seven days for observation. This can vary from mild withdrawal symptoms, which can be managed by supportive care (cuddling, quiet environment and using pacifiers) to more marked symptoms, which will need medication. Research suggests that around 50% of babies will show signs of withdrawal that are severe enough to require medication (usually oral morphine) and will need specialised care in the Newborn Intensive and Special Care unit.

## Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and sleeping accidents

Research has identified several ways to care for your baby that will reduce the risk of sudden and unexpected infant death, including Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and fatal sleeping accidents.

If you are smoking, using drugs, alcohol or medicines that make you feel drowsy, sleeping with your baby is dangerous. Anything that makes you sleep deeply will make it hard for you to respond properly to your baby's needs. You may also be less aware of where your baby is in your bed and any dangerous positions your baby may be in. These things greatly increase the risk of your baby dying suddenly.

It is important that a baby is in a smoke free environment at all times, sleeps in their own cot (never on the couch), lies on their back without their face or head covered with their feet touching the bottom of the cot, which makes wriggling under the blankets less likely.

For more information, speak with your midwife or doctor or contact SIDS and Kids by phone 1300 308 307 for the cost of a local call – or visit the SIDS and Kids website [www.sidsandkids.org](http://www.sidsandkids.org)

## For more information

### On the Women's website

[www.thewomens.org.au/wm-pregnancy-drugs-alcohol](http://www.thewomens.org.au/wm-pregnancy-drugs-alcohol)

### Women's Alcohol and Drug Service

Royal Women's Hospital  
8.30am–5.30pm Monday to Friday  
Tel: (03) 8345 3931  
Email: [wads@thewomens.org.au](mailto:wads@thewomens.org.au)

### DirectLine

DirectLine is part of Turning Point's state-wide telephone service network, providing 24-hour, seven day counselling, information and referral to alcohol and drug treatment and support services throughout Victoria. DirectLine is a free, anonymous and confidential service. | Tel: 1800 888 236

### Quit

Visit this website to help you quit or help you find out more about how smoking harms you.  
Tel: 137848 | [www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au)

### SIDS and Kids

Tel: 1300 308 307 | [www.sidsandkids.org](http://www.sidsandkids.org)