



Opioids

An information leaflet for
Patients and their Carers

Introduction

This short pamphlet is designed to help you or the person you care for understand more about the opioid medication that has been prescribed. Opioids are mainly prescribed to relieve pain but can also help to relieve the feeling of breathlessness or to relieve persistent cough.

What are opioids?

Opioids are a group of medicines used to manage pain. The most commonly used opioids are codeine, buprenorphine, morphine, diamorphine, oxycodone, fentanyl and methadone.

How do they work?

Like many drugs, opioids work by attaching themselves to receptors on the surface of cells. Different receptors have different effects. In the nervous system they can relieve pain whilst in the intestine they can cause constipation.

Which is the right opioid for me?

The choice of which opioid is the best for any one patient is based on three factors:

- 1: how bad is the pain?
- 2: how is the medicine taken?
- 3: what are the likely side effects?

Let's look at these three factors one at a time:

- 1: Strength: some opioids are stronger than others, but the strength also depends on the dose. If one opioid fails to relieve pain, then your doctor might change it to another to see if it is effective.
- 2: Route of administration: this depends both on the opioid that is being used and the general condition of the person receiving it. Some people may not be able to take medicines by mouth, in which case some opioids are available in medicated patches. Opioids can also be given by injection, usually subcutaneously, which means an injection into the tissues under the skin. This can be as repeated injections or as a continuous infusion in a battery-operated pump called a syringe driver.

3: Possible side effects: these vary from person to person. Appropriate dose changes, sometimes together with addition of other medications can usually deal effectively with them all.

1: constipation: this is a very common side effect but can be dealt with by taking appropriate laxatives.

2: nausea and vomiting: again quite common, especially when starting opioids or increasing the dose, but relieved by appropriate medications.

3: sleepiness: this can happen when an opiate is started or the dose is increased but usually improves within a week.

4: hallucinations: If you have hallucinations you should contact your district nurse or general practitioner, who will be able to help relieve this symptom.

5: dose too high: if the dose is too high, or the medicine builds up abnormally in the body, opioids can cause the breathing rate to slow down, muscles to twitch and for the patient to feel very drowsy. If this happens to you or the person you are caring for unexpectedly, you should contact the nurse or doctor straight away.

Dependence

Many people might be anxious that they will get addicted to opioids and that their effectiveness might wear off with time. When used for relief of pain this is very rarely a problem.

Storage and disposal of opioids

Due to the powerful effects of these medicines they should be stored securely in the home, in a place where they are not on display. They should be kept in child-proof containers and well out of children's reach. You should return all unwanted medicines to your local pharmacy.

Summary

Opioids are a group of drugs 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.

Side effects, if they do occur, can almost always be treated successfully.

If you still have questions after reading this pamphlet please don't hesitate to talk to a member of the nursing or medical staff, who will do all they can to provide you with as much information and advice as possible.

Further information

www.fpm.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware