

Reducing your Opioid Pain Medication dose

Why does my opioid pain medication need to be reduced?

Before review at the pain clinic, a gradual reduction in your pain medication dose is needed over the next six months to improve your pain management, reduce serious side effects and improve your function and quality of life.

We are doing this with your best interests in mind. Your GP will help you with this but you must be actively involved.

Six months is plenty of time to complete a medication reduction without the likelihood of causing any stress or withdrawal.

The pain clinic cannot authorise your medications and your GP may not be able to prescribe them if we haven't made progress in reducing your pain medications by at **least 30% over six months**.

In some cases, we may ask Next Step Drug and Alcohol Services to review your case. This is a routine safety measure for responsible prescribing and provides an expert opinion on your pain medication use. This doesn't necessarily mean we feel you're addicted or misusing your medications.

Why high doses of *morphine*-based pain medications (opioids) are a concern?

The human body is not designed to have high levels of morphine-based (opioid) pain medications (for example: *MS Contin*, *Oxycontin*, *methadone*, patches and *codeine*) floating around in the blood stream.

When the body detects high levels of opioids in the bloodstream, it produces chemicals which actually increase the pain signal, to counteract these medications. This increases your pain sensitivity and is called *opioid induced hyperalgesia*.

Your body may also have become used to, or developed a *tolerance* to, pain medications, meaning you continually need a larger dose to get the same pain relief. This leads to a vicious cycle; the higher the dose, the more side effects develop and worse the pain sensitivity becomes.

Patients with these problems often complain of pain all over the body with extreme sensitivity to touch and request increasing doses of pain medications. This makes the problem steadily worse, often resulting in huge doses!

The way to deal with this problem is a very gradual, steady reduction in you pain medication to reset the chemical balance of your brain and reduce your pain.

Your pain will very likely **improve** (or at least be no worse) on a lower dose, with fewer side effects.

The majority of pain specialists agree that for most people in chronic pain, a maximum of 90 mg of *morphine* equivalents per day is an acceptable trade off between pain relief and side-effects.

Opioid pain medications can cause the following side effects (some of which you may not even notice):

- Reduced hormone levels, like testosterone and estrogen. This can cause low energy, changes in your mood (depression) and reduced sex drive.
- Brittle bones (osteoporosis).
- Impaired brain function and structure (wasting of brain tissues), leading to a risk of psychological problems, memory and poor sleep patterns.
- Reduced immune system function, possibly resulting in a higher risk of infections and cancer.
- Addiction (getting hooked) in up to 15% of pain patients.

Opioids are ‘serious’ medications

They are just as dangerous as cancer-chemotherapy drugs.

Opioid pain medications are powerful and potentially dangerous and may cause brain damage and even death if a person uses too much (overdoses).

Take home message

As you can see, there are many reasons to try and reduce your opioid medication, to improve your health and quality of life. In conjunction with your GP, we will review the doses regularly and prescribe the lowest dose that keeps you active, moving, working and comfortable, with the lowest possible side effects.