

Treating opioid dependence with medication



Your doctor has talked with you about buprenorphine/naloxone (Suboxone or another brand) or has prescribed it for you. This fact sheet explains how the treatment works, how to take it, and the conditions for obtaining it.

What is this medication?

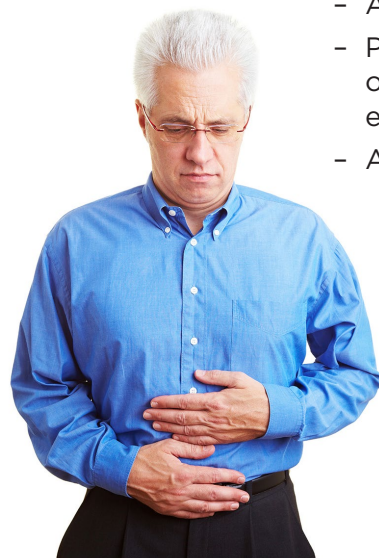
Buprenorphine/naloxone is a medication from the opioid family (hydromorphone, oxycodone, morphine, heroin, etc.).

It comes in the form of a tablet made up of two substances:

- 1 Buprenorphine.** This replaces the opioids you're taking.
- 2 Naloxone.** This is an antidote to opioids. It remains inactive if the medication is taken correctly. But if the medication is used improperly (for example, by injection), the naloxone becomes active and neutralizes the effects of the buprenorphine.

Why is this medication being prescribed for me?

When you stop taking opioids, you'll get withdrawal symptoms: everything hurts, you sweat, you're hot and cold, you have diarrhea or a runny nose.



The medication relieves these symptoms for at least 24 hours. It also decreases the cravings. On the other hand, it doesn't produce any euphoria (high).

The medication will help you to have a more stable lifestyle. It will allow you to resume your daily activities and even to study or work.

What are the benefits of dependence treatment?

The benefits include:

- Less risk of overdose.
- Less stress related to having to find substances to consume.
- A healthier lifestyle.
- Protection for your health, less risk of getting an infection from injection equipment, such as HIV or hepatitis.
- Access to medical treatments.

How do I take this medication?



Let it melt under your tongue. To limit side effects, respect the prescribed dose and the number of times you are supposed to take it each day.

It's a good idea to drink before taking it. The tablet will melt faster. It's also better not to eat or drink for 30 minutes afterwards.

Important! Let the tablets melt completely. Don't chew or swallow them. If you do, they won't be effective.



Don't let anyone else take the medication. That can be dangerous.

STARTING THE TREATMENT

This is called the induction phase. There are 2 ways to do it.

- 1 Treatment starts when:
 - you haven't taken any opioids for a period of time set by your doctor
 - you start to have withdrawal symptoms
- 2 Treatment starts without waiting for withdrawal symptoms, using very low doses (microdoses). Then the doses are gradually increased.

You and your doctor will decide together which method is best in your case.

How long does treatment last?

To treat this type of dependence, it's best to take the medication for a very long time (several years, or even for the rest of your life). For your safety, stopping the treatment must be done according to a plan developed with your healthcare team.



IMPORTANT

Never stop your treatment abruptly. If you do, you'll have withdrawal symptoms.

What are the side effects?

They are the same as those of other opioids, but often weaker.

The main ones are:

- Constipation
- Headache (often temporary at the beginning of treatment)
- Dizziness
- Nausea or vomiting
- Stomach ache
- Increased sweating
- Drowsiness

If a side effect bothers you, talk with your doctor, who will find a solution with you.

Can I drink alcohol during treatment?

Avoid or limit alcohol intake. It can make drowsiness worse.

Can I drive and do manual labor?

Avoid driving or using dangerous equipment at the beginning of treatment.

When your dose is stable, and **if you're not drowsy**, there's no problem. But be sure to stay vigilant and alert. In the eyes of the law, you remain responsible of your actions.

Can I take this medication if I'm pregnant or breastfeeding?



If you're pregnant, breastfeeding, or planning to become pregnant, **tell your doctor right away.** Together you'll determine how to continue treatment.

Important. Never stop treatment abruptly during pregnancy, as this will produce withdrawal symptoms for you and your baby.

What if I take other medications or natural health products?

Certain medications and substances should not be taken at the same time. The mix can cause serious side effects and even overdose.

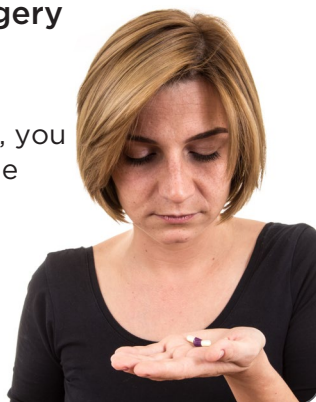
Tell any doctors you see that you're taking buprenorphine/naloxone.



CAUTION

You're having surgery soon?

Contact your doctor right away. Together, you may decide to change the dose. The doctor will also modify the medication used during surgery.



What should I do if I miss a dose?

Take it as soon as possible. However, if it's almost time for the next dose, wait and take it then.

Don't double the next dose.

If it's been more than 3 days, contact your healthcare team.

Where should I store my medication?

Store it in a safe place out of the reach of children. It's sensitive to heat and humidity. Don't store it in the kitchen or bathroom.



What are the signs of overdose?

Overdose is rare with this medication. However, **the risk is high if you take other substances** (such as alcohol or benzodiazepines) or if you take more than the prescribed doses.

Watch out for:

- difficult, slow, or irregular breathing
- no reaction to noise or pain



Important. For your safety, the people living with you or a neighbor should be aware of these signs.

What if I overdose?

> If you're able to react:

- Take the antidote (naloxone) as you were shown. It's free and can be obtained without a prescription at your pharmacy. The pharmacist will show you how to use it.
- Call **9-1-1** or go to a hospital emergency room as soon as possible.

Warning! Naloxone should only be taken to treat an overdose. Never take it to relieve a side effect.

> If you're not able to react, someone close to you must:

- Call **9-1-1**.
- Give you naloxone in the way they were shown.

Are there conditions to receive the treatment?

Yes. You must keep your appointments. At the beginning of treatment, they're more frequent, and then they're more spread out over time. Notify the team quickly if you can't keep an appointment.

At the beginning, you'll pick up your medication every day at the pharmacy of your choice. Gradually, you may be able to take doses at home (unsupervised). It depends on your follow-up, your attitude, and your stability.



If you change pharmacies or want more unsupervised doses (if you'll be travelling, for example), talk with your healthcare team as soon as possible.

Lost, stolen, or destroyed doses are not replaced. However, it's important to let your healthcare team know if this happens.

Who should I contact for help or to ask questions?

Ask a member of your healthcare team.



USEFUL RESOURCES

On administering naloxone in an emergency situation:
Institut national de la santé publique du Québec.

> www.inspq.qc.ca

Select English in the top right corner then type "naloxone" in the search field → Naloxone administration

Support and information for people with an addiction problem:

> drogue-aidereference.qc.ca

Click on EN, top left, for English.

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site

chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

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