

# Treating opioid dependence with medication

## Methadone



Your doctor has talked with you about methadone 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?

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

### 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, you feel anxious and maybe even depressed.

The medication relieves these symptoms for at least 24 hours. It also decreases the cravings.

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?

Methadone is generally prescribed in liquid form. You take it orally. To limit side effects, respect the dose and the number of times prescribed.



#### WARNING

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

## STARTING THE TREATMENT

This is called the induction phase. The methadone doses are increased gradually, until you reach the dose that helps you to feel well for 24 hours with the fewest side effects. This period can last several weeks.



## 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.

Here are the main ones, with advice for relieving some of them:

- **Constipation.** Your doctor can prescribe a medication to soften your stools (a laxative). Unless it is contraindicated, drink 6 to 8 glasses of liquid per day. Stay active and eat high-fibre foods. It's best to prevent constipation before it starts.
- **Occasional headache** (frequent at the start of treatment).
- **Dizziness.**

- **Nausea or vomiting.** Eat little, but often. If necessary, take an over-the-counter nausea medication such as Gravol (dimenhydrinate). Nausea generally goes away after a few days.
- **Stomach ache.**
- **Increased sweating.**
- **Feeling sleepy** (drowsiness). This can be dangerous. If this happens, tell your healthcare team as soon as possible. In the first few days of treatment, be careful and see how you react to the medication.
- **Sexual problems** (difficulty getting an erection, no menstruation, etc.).
- **Weight gain.**
- **Itching.** Apply a cool, wet towel to your skin. You can take a bath with colloidal oatmeal (fine powder). Apply a menthol-based cream. You can also take an antihistamine (but this product may cause drowsiness). Ask your pharmacist for help.



If a side effect bothers you and you can't get any relief, talk with your doctor, who can find a solution with you.

## Can I drink alcohol during the treatment?

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

## Can I drive and do manual labour?

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 for 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 immediately.** Together you'll determine how to continue treatment.

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

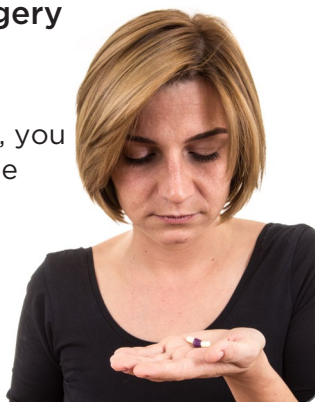
Tell any doctors you see that you're taking methadone.



### IMPORTANT

#### 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 forget to take 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. If possible, keep your bottles of methadone in the refrigerator, in a locked container.



## What are the signs of overdose?

The risk is high if you take other substances (such as alcohol or benzodiazepines) or if you take more than the prescribed doses.

Watch for these signs:

- difficult, slow, or irregular breathing
- no reaction to noise or pain
- feeling very drowsy
- dizziness or confusion
- noises such as choking, snoring, or gurgling in the throat
- skin that is moist and cold
- very small pupils
- blue lips and fingertips



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

## What if I overdose?

### > If you're able to react:

- Take the antidote (naloxone) as you were shown. This antidote is 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 pharmacy or want more unsupervised doses (if you'll be travelling, for instance) 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.  
> [www.inspq.qc.ca/en](http://www.inspq.qc.ca/en)  
Type "naloxone" in the search field →  
Naloxone administration

Support and information for people with an addiction problem:  
> [drogue-aidereference.qc.ca](http://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](http://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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