

# Long-acting opioids

## To relieve pain



**Your doctor has prescribed long-acting opioids to relieve your pain. They are also called opiates.**

Long-acting opioids include: codeine, oxycodone, hydromorphone, morphine, tramadol, tapentadol, methadone, and fentanyl and buprenorphine skin patches.

### How is this medication taken?

Long-acting opioids are available as tablets to swallow or as patches to apply to the skin. The tablets are taken every 8, 12, or 24 hours, depending on the case. Patches are usually changed every 3 days (fentanyl) or every 7 days (buprenorphine). Doses vary from patient to patient.

This medicine is gradually released into your body. It provides long-lasting relief that lessens the frequency of pain peaks. It is important to take your medication regularly and to respect the prescribed doses.

**Never stop taking your medication from one day to the next, as you could experience withdrawal symptoms (nausea, vomiting, tremors, chills, etc.).**

Patients who receive an opioid prescription commit to a therapeutic contract.

#### Here are the rules to follow:

- > respect the prescribed doses
- > get your prescription from only one doctor
- > buy all your medications from the same pharmacy (of your choice)

### How long will this treatment go on?

The treatment can go on for months or years. Long-acting opioids are used to relieve persistent pain. They are taken alone or in combination with short-acting opioids.



## What are the side effects?

Opioids can cause certain side effects. Many of them are temporary. The main ones are:

The side effects are not serious, but sometimes they're uncomfortable. Here are some tips if you have one or another of these effects:

- constipation
- nausea (feeling like vomiting)
- drowsiness (feeling sleepy)
- itchiness (an urge to scratch)
- confusion and hallucinations
- loss of balance, increased risk of falling



If you experience side effects, and if these worry you, are persistent, or get worse, tell your doctor or a health professional as soon as possible.

- > **Constipation:** Your doctor may prescribe a drug to soften stools with a laxative. Unless contraindicated, drink 6 to 8 glasses of liquid per day, try to stay active, and eat high-fibre foods. It's better to prevent constipation before it sets in.
- > **Nausea:** Eat little, but often. If necessary, take over-the-counter nausea medication such as Gravol (dimenhydrinate), either in tablet or suppository form. Nausea often goes away after a few days.
- > **Drowsiness:** Usually, drowsiness disappears gradually. If it persists or is very strong, tell your doctor or pharmacist without delay. During the first few days of treatment, take care and see how you react.

- > **Itchiness:** Apply a fresh wet towel to the skin. You can take a bath with colloidal oatmeal (in fine powder), apply a menthol-based cream, or use an antihistamine (this product can, however, cause drowsiness). Ask your pharmacist for help).



- > **Confusion and hallucinations:** This side effect mainly affects the elderly and those in poor health. Reduce the dose or stop taking the drug completely, then promptly consult your doctor to reassess the treatment.
- > **Loss of balance:** Walk carefully. Go more slowly. If necessary, use a cane or walker.

## Could I become addicted to opioids?

If you take them as prescribed to relieve pain, there is little risk that opioids will be a problem. It's important to distinguish between dependence and misuse.

- > **Dependence:** If you stop taking the medication all at once, you may experience symptoms such as chills, tremors, anxiety, nausea, or stomach cramps. To counter these effects, the doses can be gradually reduced. If necessary, your doctor will adjust the medication.
- > **Misuse:** If you feel you're taking it for any reason other than pain relief (for instance, to increase the feeling of well-being and pleasure), it's very important to discuss this with your doctor.

If you have ever had a problem with overuse (regardless of the substance, including alcohol), report it to your doctor. He or she will be better able to help you and ensure the treatment is safe for you.

## Can I drink alcohol during the treatment?

Alcohol can intensify the effects of opioids on the brain. That's why it's advisable to avoid or limit the intake of alcohol (and drinks containing it) for the entire time you're in treatment. **But be careful:** don't suddenly stop this treatment because you intend to drink alcohol (for example, during a night out).

## Can I drive and do manual labour during the treatment?

Opioids can cause drowsiness. You may have difficulty driving a vehicle or using certain tools.

Before driving again or operating dangerous tools, make sure you're functional and fully awake.

Be vigilant at the beginning of treatment and at each dose change. In the eyes of the law, you remain responsible for your actions.



## Can I take opioids while pregnant or breastfeeding?

If you're pregnant or breastfeeding, or planning a pregnancy, tell your doctor.

Opioids don't cause fetal malformation. However, if you take them throughout your pregnancy, the baby could experience withdrawal after birth. Also, a small amount of the drug may pass into breast milk. Talk with your obstetrician about this so that a pediatrician can follow the baby.

**Important:** Never stop your treatment abruptly during pregnancy, as stopping it will create withdrawal symptoms for you and the baby. Talk to your doctor first.

## Do I need to follow any special diet during the treatment?

No. However, you can reduce certain side effects with the tips mentioned above.

## What happens if I take other medications or natural products?

Some drugs or natural products can change the effect of opioids. They can intensify or diminish it. It's always best to talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking other products. He or she will make sure to avoid interactions, either by changing the time you take your medication or by offering you another product.

## What should I do if I forget to take a dose?

Wait and take the next dose. If the pain returns in the meantime, take a short-acting opioid.

**Don't double the dose.**

## Where should I store my medication?

Store it in a safe place, away from children. Medications are sensitive to heat and humidity. Don't store them in the kitchen or bathroom.



## What should I do in the case of an emergency or overdose?

**Important:** Go to the emergency room as quickly as possible. For immediate assistance, call **9-1-1**.

If you have any naloxone, an antidote, follow these instructions:

- > If your condition allows:
  - Take the naloxone in the way you were shown
  - Call **9-1-1**
  - Have someone near you
- > It's important that a family member with whom you live, or a roommate, or else a neighbour:
  - is able to recognize the signs of overdose: difficult, slow, or irregular breathing (signs of respiratory depression) and lack of response to noise or pain
  - knows how to administer naloxone
  - in the case of an overdose, administers naloxone and then calls **9-1-1**

Naloxone is available in pharmacies free of charge, without a prescription. The pharmacist will show you how to use it.

**Caution:** Naloxone should only be taken to treat an overdose. Never take it to relieve a side effect.



### REMEMBER

**You can manage your pain!**  
**How? By doing:**

- light activities
- progressive exercises
- relaxation techniques
- your favourite hobbies and pastimes



Eat well to maintain a healthy weight. Sleep enough to feel rested. Take your medications as prescribed.



For your health and that of your loved ones, never take someone else's medication and never share yours. Bring any leftover doses back to the pharmacy.

## Who can I contact if I have questions?

If you have questions about the medication, ask your pharmacist or nurse. Otherwise, ask your doctor at your next appointment.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Drugs: support and referral  
Support and Information Service.  
> **1 800 265-2626**

Québec Association of Chronic Pain:  
> **douleurchronique.org**

Canadian Pain Society:  
> **canadianpainsociety.ca**

Société Française d'Étude et de Traitement  
de la Douleur :  
> **sfetd-douleur.org**

International Association for the Study  
of Pain:  
> **iasp-pain.org**

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



You can also find them  
on our website  
**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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