

# The importance of weaning off opioids slowly



**You're going to stop taking opioids, but you've been told you need to do it gradually. This fact sheet explains why and how this weaning is done.**

## Why do I need to stop taking opioids?

These medications are generally very effective in treating pain after an operation or accident. However, when the pain decreases, they should be stopped. Over the long term, they can cause problems.

- **Decreased effectiveness**

Over time, the body gets used to the effect of the opioids. Then they become less and less effective. This is called the tolerance effect.

- **Dependence**

Some people may be psychologically or physically dependent on opioids. This can make stopping difficult.

When taking opioids for something other than pain, such as to manage anxiety, to sleep better, or for pleasure, it's important to inform a healthcare professional.

- **Health problems**

Using opioids for a long time lead, for example, to liver inflammation (hepatitis), increased risk of fracture (osteoporosis), and erectile dysfunction.

- **Pain**

Sometimes high doses of opioids can no longer control pain. They can even make it worse.

## Why is it important to stop gradually?

Stopping opioids (weaning) should be done slowly. Stopping all at once can cause severe effects called "withdrawal symptoms". These symptoms appear 6 hours to a day and a half after stopping the medication. They can last from 7 to 10 days, and sometimes longer. It all depends on the type of opioid.

Symptoms can include:

- sweats
- chills
- goose bumps
- headaches
- muscle and joint pain
- stomach cramps
- nausea
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- anxiety
- difficulty sleeping
- yawning
- runny eyes and nose
- food cravings



**Withdrawal can be very uncomfortable, but it's not dangerous.**

## When should the weaning be done?

Usually, it should be started when your pain is decreasing. With your care team, you'll determine the best time to do it, in your own case.

## How is weaning done?

- Your care team will develop a plan with you.



- The opioid doses are gradually reduced, in line with what is specified in the plan.
- You may have some withdrawal symptoms. But they will be less severe than if you had stopped all at once.
- The plan continues until you have completely stopped taking opioids.

## What symptoms should I watch for?

Contact your care team if:

- Reducing your opioid doses causes you pain.
- Your withdrawal symptoms are too strong or last more than a week.

If you can't reach anyone, call the **CHUM Patient Health Line**.

If you're taking opioids, it's important to have naloxone at home. It's an antidote to be taken in cases of overdose. It's free and available without a prescription. Talk to your pharmacist.

## Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

Ask your questions to your care team. If you can't wait until your next appointment, call the **CHUM Patient Health Line**.



### CHUM PATIENT HEALTH LINE

**514 890-8086**

**24 hours a day, 7 days a week**

You're a CHUM patient? You have questions about your health status? A nurse can help you.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Association québécoise de la douleur chronique (AQDC):  
[douleurchronique.org](http://douleurchronique.org)  
(available in English)

#### Drugs: Help and Referral

If you're concerned about your consumption or that of a loved one, you can talk to one of their counsellors. The service is free, confidential, and open at all times  
[aidedroque.ca/en/](http://aidedroque.ca/en/)

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](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)

*The content of this document in no way replaces the advice of your healthcare professional.*

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