

# 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 can become psychologically dependent on opioids. This is called an addiction. They're "hooked" on the drugs and can't stop taking them.

### > Health problems

Using opioids for a long time can bring down certain hormone levels.

### > 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 diminish after 3 to 7 days.

Symptoms can include:

- sweats
- chills
- goose bumps
- headaches
- muscle and joint pain
- stomach cramps
- nausea
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- fatigue
- anxiety
- difficulty sleeping
- yawning

To avoid these, you need gradually reduce your intake of opioids.



## 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 the instructions the plan.
- > You may have some withdrawal symptoms. But they should be less severe than if you had stopped all at once.
- > The plan continues until you have completely stopped taking opioids.

**Weaning is not dangerous. You don't need to worry about it.**

## What symptoms should I watch for?

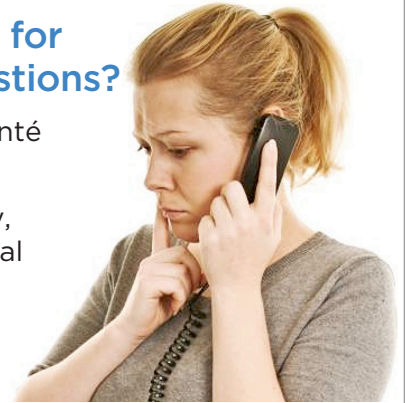
Contact your care team if:

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

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

You can contact Info-santé at **8-1-1**.

In case of an emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency room.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Québec Association of Chronic Pain (AQDC):  
> [douleurchronique.org](http://douleurchronique.org)  
(available in 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 website  
[chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)



### Questions


*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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