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EFFECTIVE PRESCRIBING  
AND THERAPEUTICS  
DIVISION  
SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

# OPIOID Medication

Learn about the  
health effects of  
prescription opioids



# What is this leaflet about?

This leaflet provides an overview of opioid medicine use. Opioids are strong pain medicines that work by blocking pain signals to the brain. They are used for acute (or short term) pain, chronic pain (pain for longer than 12 weeks) and in end of life care. They can also be used for other types of pain that you've had for a long time when weaker pain medicines have stopped working.

## Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is for you if you are due to start or are already taking opioid medicines. It will give you an idea of what to expect, from starting treatment, to reviewing and reducing your use of opioids. Your team will also provide you with suggestions of appropriate alternatives to medicines to help you manage your pain.

In each step of your treatment journey, you will be an equal partner in decisions that are made about your care. Your treatment plan will be based on what matters to you and will likely follow the 7 steps process shown in Figure 1.

You can also scan the QR code below with your phone's camera to learn more or go to Polypharmacy:



[managemeds.scot.nhs.uk](https://managemeds.scot.nhs.uk)



What to do when you are ill?



My medicines



Decision-making tools



# What is Opioid Therapy?

Opioids can help to manage your pain, and are effective when used in the short term, or as part of your wider treatment plan along with other therapies.

It is important to take your medicine as you have been advised. Taking too much of your medicine can be harmful. Opioid Therapy should not be the first treatment that is suggested to you. Evidence suggests that long term use of opioids to treat chronic pain can be harmful and is not as effective as alternatives.

Other therapies such as relaxation, mindfulness, yoga, meditation, self-care options including advice on limiting bedrest, diet and physical activity, low impact aerobic exercise such as brisk walking, water aerobics or cycling and other enjoyable activities may also be recommended to help manage your pain. All of these options should be explored in full before starting Opioid Therapy. **You can find more information about these options at [NHS Inform.Scot](https://www.nhs.uk/inform-scot) or in discussion with your healthcare professional.**




Figure 1:  
7-steps used  
in medicine  
reviews

# What are the risks?

Like all medicines, opioids can cause side effects and you are more likely to get side effects with higher doses. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if side effects concern you or do not go away.

**Some of the more common risks are summarised in the list below:**

## Side effects

- constipation
  - feeling or being sick (nausea or vomiting)
  - stomach pain
  - feeling sleepy or tired
  - feeling dizzy or a sensation of spinning (vertigo)
  - confusion
  - headaches
  - itching or skin rashes
  - dry mouth
  - low energy
- 

Taking opioid medicines for a longer time could lead to other side effects including lack of sex drive and difficulty breathing at night.

There is a growing body of evidence of the risks associated with taking opioids. If you wish to know more about this, you can consult the full version of the Opioid Quality Prescribing Guide.

## • Risks with higher doses

Higher doses of opioids have also been linked to problems with your memory and concentration, lower mood, a higher risk of fractures and worse pain.

## • Working less well over long term

Opioid medicines can work less well over time as you develop a tolerance to them. There is no good quality evidence to show long term Opioid Therapy for chronic pain works, and limited evidence to show that it works well for nerve pain.

## • Dependence and withdrawal

It is possible to become dependent on opioid medicines. If you stop taking them suddenly, you may experience withdrawal symptoms such as feeling agitated, anxious, shaking or sweating. Doses should be reduced gradually to help to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

# Your Patient Journey

## Starting Opioid Therapy

Your treatment plan will be based on **What Matters to You**. Thinking about your lifestyle, you can discuss and set realistic goals and expectations for your treatment with your healthcare professional. For example, you might want to reduce your pain level by 30%, or see an improvement in your quality of life. If you still wish to be able to drive, opioids can make you drowsy so may not be suitable.

**Your treatment plan will also take into account your level of pain, including:**

- the likely cause of your pain
- how long it lasts (the duration)
- how bad it is (intensity)
- the effects it has on you (impact)

This will provide a baseline which will help during the ongoing reviews of your treatment.



# Reviewing Opioid Therapy

Your treatment will be reviewed within four weeks of starting Opioid Therapy. It will then be reviewed again at least once a year, and more frequently if needed.

## Reducing Opioid Therapy

If you are going to reduce your opioid medication, it will be done gradually with a clear plan of what you can expect.

### Reduction plan:

- **Agree a plan** you and your healthcare team will discuss and agree how much to reduce your medicine.
- **Some withdrawal effects** are possible, such as feeling agitated or anxious, shaking and sweating. Your dose will be reduced slowly to try to avoid these. If you find these hard to manage, speak to your healthcare professional.
- **Changes to your pain** you may experience an increase in pain as you reduce your medicines, but this is likely to be short term. Other therapies can help you to manage your pain.
- **Feeling anxious** you may be worried about how you will feel when reducing your opioid medicines. This is completely normal. Your healthcare professional will be there to support you.



# TAKE THE TEMPERATURE of your opioid painkillers

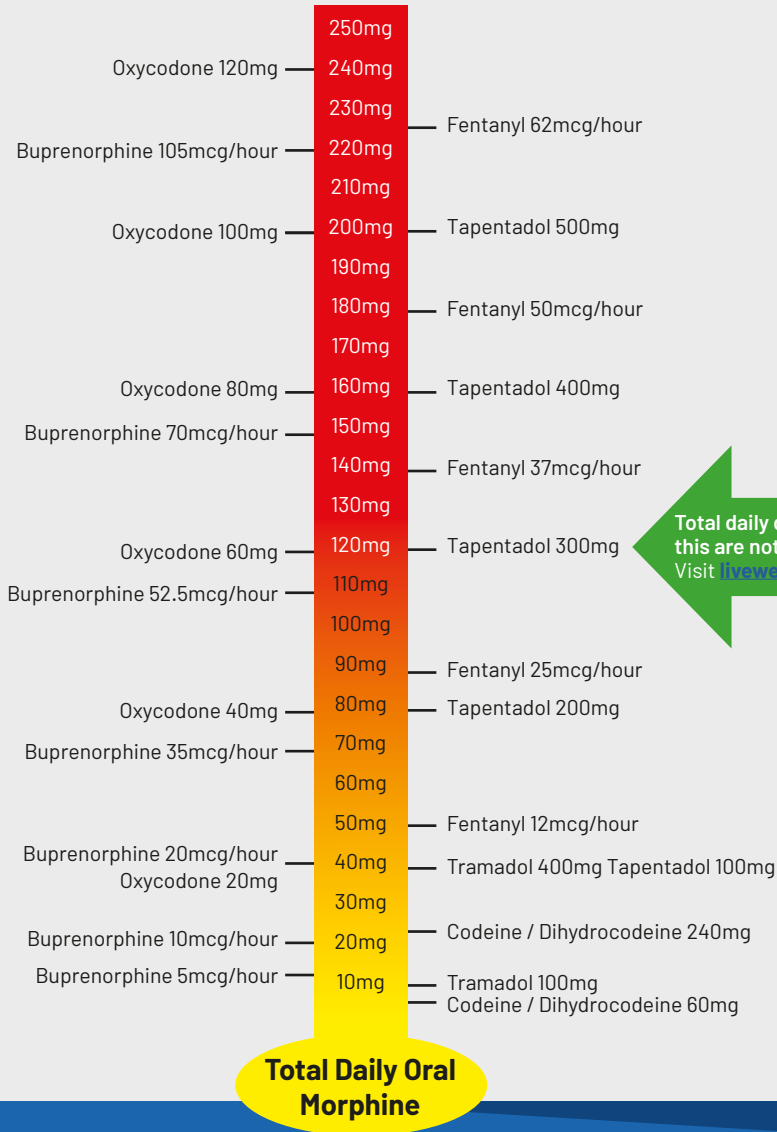


Figure 2: Image of thermometer showing rising heat for higher doses of opioids. An arrow shows daily doses of oral morphine higher than 120mg not recommended.

# Where can I find out more information?

## [SIGN Guideline for Patients](#)

Lists useful resources and websites.

## [NHS Education for Scotland](#)

Information to help self management of pain.

## [NHS Inform](#)

Advice on lifestyle strategies to help manage pain.

## [Pain Association Scotland](#)

Advice on self management of pain.

This leaflet uses information from

### ***Opioid prescribing for chronic pain:***

Medication Safety in opioid prescribing:

A quality improvement resource for shared decision making, 2021,  
Scottish Government.

[www.therapeutics.scot.nhs.uk/prescribing-strategies/](http://www.therapeutics.scot.nhs.uk/prescribing-strategies/)

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