

What are opioids?

- Opioids are a class of medications. They are also called narcotic analgesics.
- They are mainly used to treat moderate to severe pain. When used appropriately, opioids can be a safe and effective way to treat short-term or long-term pain.
- Opioids work in the central nervous system. They change the release of certain chemical messengers that communicate pain to the brain. Opioids can take away pain for a lot of people however it does not work on all types of pain.
- The safest way to treat pain with opioids is use the lowest dose needed for the shortest amount of time.
- As your pain goes away, you may need smaller doses. Or, you may find that the opioids become less effective because you develop tolerance. Your healthcare provider will work with you to decide when to adjust your dose.
- Your body can also become dependent on opioids. You may develop withdrawal side effects if you suddenly stop taking the medication, or if you reduce the dose too fast.

Examples of opioids:

- Morphine (including MOS®, M-Eslon®)
- Hydromorphone (including Dilaudid®)
- Oxycodone (including Oxycontin®)
- Fentanyl (Duragesic®, Sublimaze®)
- Methadone
- Codeine

How to use and store this medication

- Opioids can be taken by mouth (tablet, liquid or capsule), in the muscle or vein (injectable) or through the skin (patch).
- Always follow the directions on the medication label unless your healthcare provider has told you to take the opioid differently.
- Never share your medication with others.
- Store medication at room temperature, away from heat, moisture, and direct light.
- Store the medication out of reach of children and pets.
- If you have unused or expired medication, bring it to a pharmacy. Your pharmacy can dispose of it in a safe way.

If you miss a dose

- Take the dose as soon as you remember.
- If it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and continue with the next dose at the regular time.
- Do not take extra medicine to make up for a missed dose.
- If unsure what to do about a missed dose, contact your healthcare provider or pharmacist.

Safety measures

- Opioids can be sedating, especially when taken with other sedating medications or alcohol. Ask your healthcare provider before taking any other medication, including non-prescription medications, vitamins, and herbal products.
- Do not drive or participate in potentially dangerous activities until you know how this medication will affect you.
- Do not stop taking this medication suddenly without talking with your healthcare provider. They will usually decrease your dose slowly before stopping.
- Make sure your healthcare provider knows if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or if you have kidney or liver disease.
- Alternative opioids are recommended instead of codeine for children less than 12 years of age, due to variable effectiveness and safety concerns with its metabolism.

Side effects

- It is important for you to be aware of possible opioid side effects. Not all side effects happen to all people, and many people do not have any side effects.
- Less serious side effects often improve during your first few days taking the opioid. These side effects include:
 - Dizziness, lightheadedness, or drowsiness: try moving slowly when you sit or stand
 - Nausea or vomiting: try taking medication with a bit of food
 - Constipation: try increasing fluids, eat foods with fiber, and laxatives if you need them
 - Itching: using cool compresses or moisturizer help some patients
 - Dry mouth: try chewing gum, or sucking on ice chips
 - Nervousness or restlessness: avoid caffeinated drinks
 - Blurred or double vision
 - Nightmares or unusual dreams
 - Difficulty with urination
- If these side effects continue or cause distress, talk with your healthcare provider/pharmacist.

CALL 911 AND GET HELP NOW IF YOU EXPERIENCE:

- Difficulty or slow breathing
- Seizure
- Confusion or hallucinations
- Severe dizziness or drowsiness
- Difficulty walking or weakness



For more information, please see:

- [Opioid Medicines- Information for Patients and Families/ Health Canada](#)
- [Opioids and the opioid crisis- get the facts/ Health Canada](#)
- [BCCDC Harm Reduction Services- Towards the Heart](#)