

Reducing and stopping opioids

Information for patients



Why stop taking opioids?

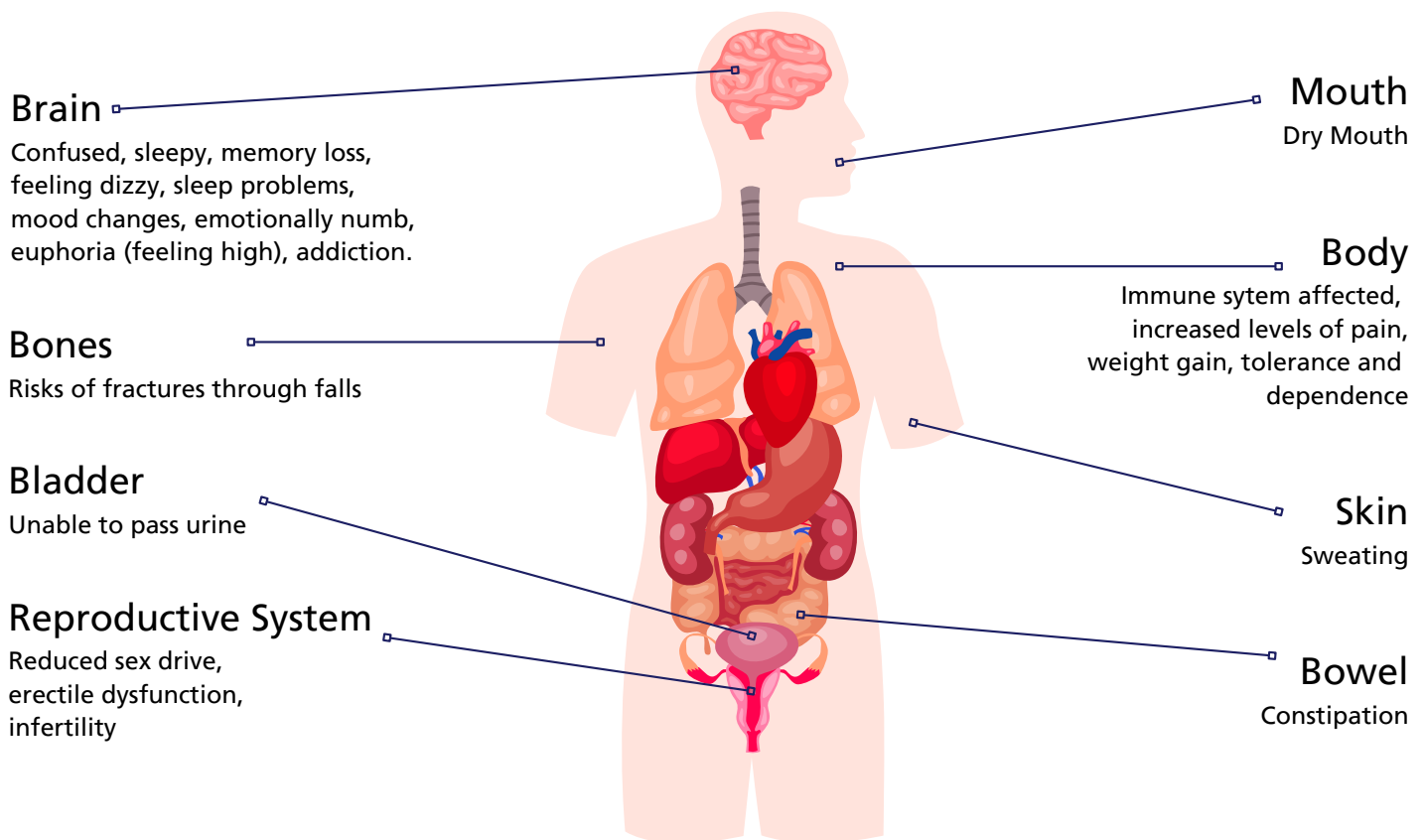
Opioids like morphine, oxycodone or fentanyl are very good painkillers for short-term pain after surgery or after an accident (such as a broken bone). This is known as acute pain and lasts days or weeks.

Research has shown that opioids are not beneficial for long-term pain and, more importantly, are not safe to take for longer periods of time. Doing this can cause side effects, addiction or early death. However, it is important that you don't stop taking your medication without speaking to a Health Care Professional first.

Oxycodone and fentanyl are stronger medicines than morphine. If you are taking these medicines, we can work out how much the same dose would be in morphine. We call this the 'morphine equivalent' dose.

The British Pain Society recommends that people with chronic pain should take no more than 120mg of morphine equivalent a day. This includes all opioid tablets, capsules or liquids you take or patches you use. Research from the USA shows that people who take high doses of opioids have an increased risk of death (from overdose or side effects), compared to patients who take no opioids or a very small dose.

Side effects of opioids



If you take opioids for a long time, they can start to make you more sensitive to pain. You may notice that something that you'd expect to hurt a bit can feel extremely painful. So, rather than help reduce pain, the opioids start to make your pain system more sensitive.

Stopping opioids completely will reverse this effect, so you may find that your pain gets better once you've stopped taking opioids.

Tolerance, dependence and addiction

Tolerance is when opioids become less effective over time, as your body has got used to the pain-relieving effect.

Your body can also become dependent on opioids, so that if you stop taking them suddenly you get symptoms of withdrawal such as feeling shivery or sweaty, or having diarrhoea or stomach cramps.

Occasionally people in pain can become addicted to opioids. You might crave the medicine or carry on taking it even when it has a negative effect on your physical or mental health.

Driving and opioids

In March 2015, a new drug driving law was introduced. It introduced a limit for morphine (as well as other medicines), above which you shouldn't drive. The maximum blood level is 80mcg/l, which is approximately 200mg of morphine equivalent a day. Tests showed that people with high blood levels of morphine can have slower reaction and decision times, leading to problems judging distance and their own speed. Driving ability gets even worse if you are also taking other medicines that make you feel sleepy, like diazepam, amitriptyline or gabapentin, among others.

Other medicines, like codeine or tramadol, or some over the counter medication, can also affect your ability to drive safely by making you feel sleepy or have difficulty concentrating.

Whatever medicines you are taking, you must never drive if you do not feel safe to do so.

What can help me while reducing my opioids?

We can use a plan that reduces your opioid doses slowly. This will help to reduce the chance of you developing feelings of withdrawal or, if you do, they will be mild.

You may find you are more irritable than usual or may feel more anxious or depressed. If this becomes a problem, speak with your GP about Talking Therapies or changes to your other, non-opioid medication.

As you reduce your opioids you may experience withdrawal symptoms, such as feeling shivery or sweaty, or having diarrhoea or stomach cramps. Occasionally pain may worsen for a short while.

These symptoms shouldn't last long, and we suggest that you use distraction or relaxation techniques to help during this time. Music, books or films can be useful for distraction, as well as getting out and keeping active, even if it is just walking. Having nice snacks or drinks may help if you lose your appetite, and can stop you from becoming dehydrated.

The most important thing you will need is support from family and friends, who should understand that this is an important but possibly difficult thing for you to do. Even after you stop all your opioids it can take 4-6 months to feel back to normal, so you will still need their support during this time.

If you feel like you are struggling with your opioid reduction, speak with the Health Care Professionals supporting you such as your GP, Practice-Based Pharmacist, Nurse or Social Prescriber who can discuss long term pain management strategies with you, including self-care resources.

The following section has a list of useful resources that may help you during reduction of your opioid medicine and to find new ways of managing your pain.

Useful resources

The Pain Toolkit

This gives practical advice and techniques to help manage pain.

Visit paintoolkit.org

Live Well with Pain

This site offers resources for patients exploring medication use, medication reviews, behaviour change, opioid prescribing.

Visit livewellwithpain.co.uk/resources-for-people-with-pain/

Healthtalk.org

Videos about chronic pain and how to manage it.

Visit healthtalk.org/introduction/chronic-pain

Flippin' Pain

This is a public health campaign with a goal to change the way we think about, talk about and treat persistent pain. Website contains includes patient leaflets, videos, podcasts, Ted Talks, booklets for both patients and clinicians.

Visit flippinpain.co.uk

British Pain Society

Helpful information section for patients with pain conditions, and details of various support groups.

Visit britishpainsociety.org/people-with-pain

Mental Wellbeing Toolkit Leaflet

Local health professionals in Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire have developed a wellbeing leaflet which contains helpful advice to help you improve your wellbeing.

Visit bnssg.icb.nhs.uk/library/mental-wellbeing-leaflet/

Apps

Headspace - An every day mental health app to support you with pain relief as well as stress, sleep and all of life's moments.



NHS Better health - a selection of apps to support your physical and mental well-being.

