

Risks of opioid medicines

This information sheet will help you understand more about the risks of taking opioid medicines and how you can reduce those risks. This information sheet is not a substitute for talking with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Introduction

Opioids are a type of medicine that help relieve pain. They are very effective over short periods to relieve moderate to severe pain. They are also sometimes prescribed for long periods to relieve pain in serious conditions, such as cancer. Examples of opioids include codeine, tramadol, fentanyl, oxycodone and morphine.

Like all medicines, taking opioids comes with risks. Some of serious risks are described below. Whānau, friends and carers can play an important role in the safe use of these medicines and reducing the risk of harm. Please share this information with them.

Risks of taking opioids

- **Opioid overdose can lead to death.** Overdose is more likely to happen at higher doses, or if you take opioids with alcohol or with other sedating drugs (such as sleeping pills, anxiety medication, anti-depressants, muscle relaxants). See the next page for signs of overdose.
- **Addiction may occur**, even when opioids are used as prescribed. The healthcare professional who prescribed the opioid or your pharmacist should explain how long it is safe for you to take your medicine for.
- **Life-threatening breathing problems or reduced blood pressure may occur** with opioid use. Talk to the healthcare professional who prescribed your opioid about whether any health conditions you have may increase your risk.
- **Your pain may worsen** with long-term opioid use or at higher doses. You may not feel pain relief with further increases in your dose. Talk to the healthcare professional who prescribed your opioid if this happens to you, as a lower dose or change in treatment may be required.
- **Withdrawal symptoms**, such as widespread pain, irritability, agitation, flu-like symptoms and trouble sleeping, are common when you stop using opioids or reduce the dose.
- **Babies born to mothers taking opioids** may develop life-threatening withdrawal symptoms.

Signs of opioid overdose

Taking too much opioid medicine, whether intentional or not, is called an overdose. This can be very serious and may cause death.

Slow or no breathing



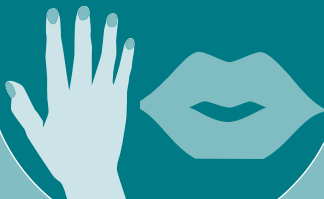
Tiny pupils



Very dizzy or drowsy



Blue nails and lips



Cold or clammy skin



Choking, gurgling or snoring sounds



Can't be woken up



Slow heartbeat or low blood pressure



If you think that you or someone else has taken too much opioid medicine, call 111 immediately

More information

- For further information on using opioids safely and a list of possible side effects, read the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet that came with your medicine. CMIs are also available on the Medsafe website: [medsafe.govt.nz/Medicines/infoSearch.asp](https://www.medsafe.govt.nz/Medicines/infoSearch.asp)
- For help with mental health and addiction: [govt.nz/browse/health/help-with-mental-health-and-addiction/](https://www.govt.nz/browse/health/help-with-mental-health-and-addiction/)
- To report side effects from opioid medicines: [nzphvc.otago.ac.nz/reporting/](https://www.nzphvc.otago.ac.nz/reporting/)