

Opioid Analgesics

The name of your medicine is _____

About Your Medicine

OPIOID ANALGESICS (op-e-oid anal-JEE-zicks) are medicines used for pain relief.

They are also known as narcotic medicines. Examples are morphine, codeine, oxycodone, hydromorphone (Dilaudid[®]), meperidine (Demerol[®]), levorphanol, hydrocodone, methadone, fentanyl (Duragesic[®] or Actiq[®]), and other chemically related compounds. Opioids may be combined with other medicines such as acetaminophen (Tylenol[®]), in preparations such as Percocet[®], Lortab[®], and Vicodin[®].

If you have any questions or concerns about the information in this leaflet or if you want more information about your medicine and its use, check with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Remember, keep this and all other medicines out of the reach of children and never share your medicines with others.

Before Using This Medicine

Tell your doctor, nurse, and pharmacist if you:

- are allergic to any medicine, either prescription or nonprescription (over-the-counter)
- are pregnant or intend to become pregnant while using this medicine
- are breast feeding
- are taking any other prescription or nonprescription (over-the-counter) medicine; especially those that may

depress the central nervous system and cause sleepiness

- have any other medical problems, especially chronic lung disease or colitis

Proper Use of This Medicine

Take this medicine only as directed by your doctor. You will start on a low dose of the opioid. This can be slowly increased, if necessary, over several days with the doctor's direction. You must not increase the opioid dose without the doctor's permission and guidance. Controlled increases in dosage are safe, but a sudden increase in dosage (overdose) can lead to harmful side effects including severe sleepiness, trouble breathing, or even death. Do not change the way you take this medicine without first speaking to your doctor.

Pain medicine works best if taken before the pain is at its worst. Your doctor may, therefore, tell you to take the medicine on a regular daily schedule rather than on an as-needed basis. Small, regular doses will provide continuing relief with few or no side effects. If you are taking this medicine regularly and you miss a dose, take it as soon as possible. However, if it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and go back to your regular schedule – do not take a double dose.

If you have been prescribed a long-acting or sustained-release opioid (examples: Oramorph[®], MS-Contin[®], OxyContin[®]),

these pills must not be chewed, crushed, or cut in half. This changes the timed-release actions of the medicine and may cause an overdose. The one exception to this rule is methadone which can be cut or crushed.

Opioids interact with a number of other drugs including tranquilizers, sedatives, antihistamines (allergy medicines), alcohol, and many illegal or “street” drugs. Using any of these drugs with opioids can lower blood pressure, and cause deep sleepiness or trouble breathing. This may be harmful or even fatal. Ask your doctor for advice before starting any of these medicines.

Important Definitions

Physical dependence is a condition where the body becomes used to regular doses of a medicine. If the medicine is stopped suddenly, the person has withdrawal symptoms. This can happen with many medicines, including steroids, blood pressure medicine, anti-seizure or anti-anxiety medicines, and opioids. Withdrawal usually begins within 24 to 48 hours after the last dose. Symptoms of opioid withdrawal may include:

- Yawning
- Sweating
- Anxiety
- Runny nose
- Watery eyes
- Tremors
- Aching muscles
- Hot and cold flashes
- Abdominal cramps
- Diarrhea.

Withdrawal may last a few days. It is self-limited and, while uncomfortable, withdrawal is not life threatening. To avoid withdrawal from opioids, you should make sure your medicines are renewed on time by asking for refills before you run out of

medicine. If you want to stop taking opioids, do not stop them suddenly. Instead, contact your doctor about how to slowly reduce the dose.

Physical dependence is not the same thing as “addiction” and poses no problem as long as you do not stop the medicine all at once. The opioid can be stopped safely by slowly reducing the dose, often over two to three weeks.

Psychological addiction or dependence is different. In this case, a person takes a medicine to obtain mental “numbness” or a “high” instead of pain relief. Unless you have a history of substance abuse, there is little risk of addiction when opioids are prescribed by a doctor and taken as directed.

Tolerance is a need for a higher dose to keep the same effect. Tolerance to opioid pain relief may occur but is fairly rare. On the other hand, patients often develop tolerance to the side effects (see below) fairly quickly. If you develop a tolerance to pain relief, a modest increase in the dose may solve the problem. Switching to a different opioid may also help. If you cannot manage opioid tolerance, even using other plans, you may have to stop or reduce the opioids.

Side Effects

Most common:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Drowsiness
- Dry mouth
- Constipation

Less common:

- Itching
- Flushing
- Sweating
- Urinary difficulty

At the start of treatment, other medicines may be needed to counteract the side effects. If, at the start of treatment, you have severe side effects, you should stop taking the medicines and contact your doctor right away. Side effects usually occur at the start of treatment and go away within a few days. However, constipation tends to go on as long as you are taking this medicine. Be sure to ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about how to manage constipation.

Drowsiness or feeling light headed may be the first side effects of opioids. When you begin using opioids or your doctor orders a dose increase, you should not drive or operate heavy machinery or do other jobs that require you to be alert and thinking clearly. Once the drowsiness passes (within a few days), you may resume normal activity. If drowsiness does not go away within a few days, you should not drive or operate heavy machinery. Contact your doctor for advice.

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