



**CHU
Sainte-Justine**
Le centre hospitalier
universitaire mère-enfant
Université 
de Montréal

Short-Acting Opioid Analgesics

Information for patients and families



A doctor has prescribed opioid analgesics for you or your child. This brochure provides additional information on their use to help you reduce pain while minimizing associated side effects and risks.

What are opioid analgesics?

Opioid analgesics are medications that reduce pain. The effects of a short-acting opioid usually last 3 to 4 hours. In this brochure, the term «opioid» refers to short-acting opioids (e.g. morphine, hydromorphone, oxycodone).



How can you relieve pain and reduce side effects?

Administer non-opioid analgesics first:

acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®, Tempra®), ibuprofen (e.g. Advil®, Motrin®), naproxen (e.g. Aleve®, Naprosyn®) or other anti-inflammatory analgesics.



- **Why?** Non-opioid analgesics can provide pain relief and reduce opioid use while causing fewer side effects.
- **Who?** If your doctor or pharmacist allows you to take acetaminophen or an anti-inflammatory pain reliever (ibuprofen, naproxen or other), use it regularly. If there is no contraindication, these medications are always recommended first, even if you need to take an opioid analgesic for your pain at the same time.
- **When?** If in doubt, or if your prescription doesn't include these medications, consult your pharmacist to find out if you can take them.
- **How long?** When the pain subsides and opioids are no longer needed, you can begin to decrease the doses of non-opioid analgesics.

Be creative: Distraction alleviates pain

- **Why?** We feel less pain when we think about something else.
- **What?** Activities like reading a book or a story, playing a game, drawing, and listening to music all help to focus attention away from the pain. A position that maximizes comfort also helps to reduce pain.



How to use opioids safely



- Take your medication as prescribed and follow the doctor's and pharmacist's instructions carefully ..
 - Do not increase the dose! This can be dangerous.
 - Take the recommended dose and keep the right time intervals between doses.
- Make sure your pharmacist provides the opioid in the form that is easiest to swallow. Don't cut, crush, bite or chew tablets or capsules unless your doctor or pharmacist tells you to. Most opioids are available in liquid form.
- It is not recommended to take other over-the-counter medications or natural health products without first discussing this with your doctor or pharmacist.
- **Do not drink alcohol.**
 - Alcohol and other substances that affect alertness **should not be used** with opioids, as they can increase the side effects of opioids and have **serious consequences**.



What are the possible side effects of opioids?

The following side effects have been observed with opioid use:

- Constipation
- Nausea (wanting to vomit)
- Drowsiness (wanting to sleep)
- Itching (wanting to scratch)
- Difficulty urinating
- Dizziness, loss of balance



If you experience any of these side effects, talk to a pharmacist who can suggest strategies to treat or manage them.

Warning: Other rarer side effects may require prompt medical attention (see the section «When to consult a healthcare professional» on page 6).

Are there any activities you should avoid while taking opioids?



Yes.

- Why? Opioids can decrease alertness and cause drowsiness.
- What activities should I avoid? Any high-risk activity requiring concentration. For example:

For children, activities with a risk of falling (riding a bike, climbing on play structures, etc.)

For adults, driving a vehicle or handling dangerous tools

- **Warning:** The SAAQ prohibits driving while impaired by use of opioid analgesics. Discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist.

What is the risk of developing an opioid addiction?



The risk is low if the medication is taken to relieve pain and not for any other reason than the one recommended (such as recreational purposes, pleasure, relaxation, etc.). However, physical dependence can occur if the medication is taken regularly for more than 10 days. In case of prolonged treatment, your doctor will prescribe a gradual dose reduction to avoid physical dependence.

Since 2018, to raise awareness about the risks of opioids, federal regulations have required the use of a warning sticker on the opioid packaging and the inclusion of a fact sheet on the risks associated with their use.

If you have any additional questions or concerns about your treatment or that of your child, don't hesitate to discuss them with your pharmacist or your treatment team.

What monitoring should be done at home?



- It is recommended that an **adult stay for a 24-hour period with the person** taking a new opioid prescription or after a dose increase.
- When you return home, make sure that the person who took an opioid is not too sleepy one hour after taking the medication. If the person is sleeping, make sure they turn over in bed when disturbed. If the person doesn't move with mild stimulation, wake them up completely. This monitoring is recommended for the first three doses of opioids.

When to consult a healthcare professional if side effects occur?



- Consult the **team that prescribed the opioid, the pharmacist or Info-Santé at 811** if there is:
 - Unresolved constipation, unrelieved nausea or vomiting, difficulty urinating, or significant unrelieved itching.
- Go **immediately to the Emergency Department** or call **911** if there is:
 - Difficulty breathing, slow or irregular breathing, unresponsiveness to pain or loud noise, swelling of the throat or face, blurred vision, confusion, difficulty with balance and walking, hallucinations, skin rash or hives.

Where should I store my medications and what should I do when the treatment is over?



- Store medications in a safe place out of the reach of children or anyone for whom they are not intended.
- It is dangerous to keep leftover medications: **taking opioids outside of a medical need can have serious consequences for a person.**
 - **As soon as the pain episode is resolved, please return your unused opioids to your pharmacy** to avoid their being used by someone you know.



