

# Opioid Handout

Name: .....

Name and dose of medicine: .....When commenced: / /

Reason for medicine (source of pain): .....

## What is an opioid?

An opioid is a medicine that works by blocking pain signals sent from the body to the brain. Opioid medications can be prescribed to manage severe pain. There is no medicine that can completely relieve all pain.

Opioids are very strong medicines and **severe side effects** can occur if used with other medicines that make you feel drowsy or sleepy, alcohol or cannabis. Opioid overdose may result in death.

## How long will I use this for?

Your doctor will talk to you about this in more detail, but it is usually advised that these medicines are for short-term treatment only. There are side effects when taking opioids, and health and lifestyle effects from long-term use.

## What side effects can occur?

Some side effects that you may experience are constipation, nausea, drowsiness or confusion and loss of balance.

Your driving may be affected.

**Severe side effects** can occur especially if used with other sedative medicines, alcohol or cannabis. These include extreme drowsiness, snoring or gurgling, slow or unusual breathing, cold and clammy skin or blue lips. These may be signs of an overdose. **Call an ambulance 000 if an overdose is suspected.**

## What are the long-term effects of opioids?

- **Tolerance:** your body will need higher doses and more often.
- **Worsening of pain over time.**
- **Psychological dependence, or "addiction":** a strong desire to take more of the medicine.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Problems sleeping and worsened sleep apnoea.
- Weight gain and change in appetite.
- **Hormone imbalance & changes to sexual function:** impotence, loss of sex drive; change in menstrual periods; osteoporosis.
- Reduced saliva, dry mouth & problems with teeth.
- **If Pregnant:** the baby can become dependent and may experience withdrawal when born.
- **Physical dependence:** if the medicine is stopped suddenly, I may experience diarrhoea, stomach cramps, goose pimples and runny nose.

## What do I need to do?

- Continue using other medicines recommended by your doctor, and physical therapies to manage your pain.
- Tell your doctor if you take other medications, drink alcohol or use recreational drugs (especially cannabis).
- While using opioid medication, also take a laxative to prevent constipation.
- Return any unused opioids to your community pharmacy for safe disposal.
- Never give an opioid to a child or share an opioid with anybody else.
- Store out of reach of children, in a locked area.
- Avoid driving or using machinery if you are drowsy.

Call an ambulance 000 if an overdose is suspected.