

What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction is an approach which aims to reduce the risks when taking pharmaceutical opioids using or other drugs and encourages safer behaviours. Harm reduction recognises that some people will continue to use pharmaceutical opioids regardless of the risks. However, there are strategies that can be used to help lower the risk of harm when taking pharmaceutical opioids.

What are pharmaceutical opioids?

Pharmaceutical opioids are depressant drugs which means that they slow down the messaging between the brain and the body (e.g. slows down heart rate and breathing). Doctors may prescribe pharmaceutical opioids to help people with pain management. Pharmaceutical opioids include morphine, oxycodone, buprenorphine, methadone, hydromorphone, fentanyl, tapentadol, tramadol and codeine.

Pharmaceutical opioids - Onset and duration of effects

The onset and duration of effects vary widely depending on dose, route of administration, and the individual characteristics of the person. Some pharmaceutical opioids are immediate release while others are designed to be slow release.

Even though the apparent effects from pharmaceutical opioids may appear to have worn off, they can stay active for a long period of time (up to a couple of days) dependent on type. When prescribed, check the label and instructions to better understand the effects, or speak to your Doctor or Pharmacist.

Looking after yourself

It is important to know that using pharmaceutical opioids is never completely safe. However there are strategies that you can use to reduce the risks. Pharmaceutical opioids may cause harm to your mental or physical health, relationships, behaviours, finances or ability to work, study or care for people. Here are some strategies that can be used to help lower the risks.

- **Have you been prescribed pharmaceutical opioids from your doctor?**

If so questions you may wish to ask are:

- What are the benefits?
- What are the risks?
- Are there any other alternatives including non-medication-based treatments?
- What would happen if you did not take this medicine?

- **If you agree to using this medication, you may also wish to ask:**

- How long should I take this medication for?
- What are my chances of becoming physically or psychologically dependent upon this medicine?
- How difficult is it to stop taking this medicine?

- **If you are being prescribed opioids:**

- Take your medication as prescribed. Using a daily dosing box, a blister pack, or daily dispensing from a pharmacy can assist with this.
- Put your pharmaceutical opioids away after use and store in a safe place.

- **Start small.** Some pharmaceutical opioids are immediate release while others are designed to be slow release which means that dosage levels can vary. Whether you are using opioids for the first time or using regularly it's always important to start with a small amount, let them reach their peak, and then carefully consider as to whether you'll have more.

- **Don't use alone.** There are risks when using alone. It's always better to be in a safe environment and with people you trust if something does go wrong. If a person has overdosed on pharmaceutical opioids call an ambulance on **triple zero (000)** and if available administer naloxone.

- **Carry naloxone.** Naloxone is a drug that can reverse an opioid overdose. Anyone using opioids should have immediate access to naloxone, either to be administered to them in the event of an opioid overdose, or to administer to another person who has overdosed. For more information about naloxone speak to your doctor, pharmacist, local needle and syringe program or contact Adis on **1800 177 833**.

- **Don't mix.** Mixing pharmaceutical opioids with alcohol or other drugs increases the risk of harm. Mixing or combining pharmaceutical opioids with other depressant drugs, such as alcohol, benzodiazepines, or other opioids, also increases the risk of overdose.

- **Set limits.** Setting a limit on when and how much you use can help keep your use under control and reduces your risk of developing dependence. If you are taking pharmaceutical opioids that are not prescribed for you having regular breaks gives your brain and body time to recover. The more you break up the pattern of use, the easier it is to manage your use. For people who are dependent on opioids, it is recommended that medical advice be sought before stopping or cutting back.
- **Monitor your moods and emotions.** Opioid use can impact your mental health. Some long term mental health effects linked to opioid use include decreased motivation, mood swings, depression and anxiety, all of which increase the risk of self-harm and suicide.
- **Safer ways of using.** When taking pharmaceutical opioids always use as per the instructions. If you are using in a non-prescribed way such as injecting never share any equipment and always use new sterile equipment. Injecting opioids can increase the risk of additional harms such as blood borne viruses, infections, damage to the circulatory system, and overdose.
- **Be prepared and careful.** Opioids can impact your decision-making and risky things can become more risky. Some common things to plan for can be your transport home to avoid drug driving, having your phone charged with credit, and being prepared for safe sex.
- **Don't drive.** Opioids affects your ability to drive safely (this also includes riding a bike or scooter). It is against the law to drive or be in charge of a motor vehicle while you are 'under the influence' of opioids.
- **Pregnancy and pharmaceutical opioid use.** Pharmaceutical opioid use may increase the risk of miscarriage, premature delivery, and low birth weight. Regular pharmaceutical opioid use throughout pregnancy can cause the newborn baby to experience withdrawal symptoms. For people who are concerned about their pharmaceutical opioid use while pregnant or breastfeeding, it is important to talk to your doctor or health professional.
- **Adopt a healthy and balanced and lifestyle.** If you are using opioids remember to stay hydrated, eat well, sleep and exercise. It's also important to find a balance between work, study, play and rest.

- **Caring for yourself.** If you are using pharmaceutical opioids it can be helpful to have regular check-ups with your GP to monitor your health.
- **Caring for others.** Substance use can affect your children and others around you. Ensure your children remain safe and supervised at all times.
Please Note: Sleeping with a child in the same bed while under the influence of substances can be particularly dangerous.

What help is available?

Adis 24/7 Alcohol and Drug Support is a 24 hour, 7 day a week confidential support service for people in Queensland with alcohol and other drug concerns, their families and health professionals.

Talk to us. Anytime, anywhere.
1800 177 833

What should I do in an emergency?

If a person has overdosed on pharmaceutical opioids call an ambulance on **triple zero (000)** and if available administer naloxone. If they have stopped breathing commence CPR. If they are breathing normally, place them into the recovery position and wait with the person until the ambulance has arrived.

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Disclaimer: This factsheet does not accept, condone or promote the use of alcohol or other drugs. While most people who use pharmaceutical opioids do not suffer serious harms, the use of any drug, whether legal or not, always carries some risk. No amount of planning and care can ensure that your use of pharmaceutical opioids is 'risk free' and the best way to avoid potential harms is to use as prescribed. By developing this factsheet we are not suggesting that pharmaceutical opioid use is safe.