Narcotic Painkillers

What is a narcotic painkiller?

Narcotic describes a group of medications of the opioid class which have painkilling qualities. Because some narcotics are used recreationally or illegally some people associate the term narcotic with these uses. Morphine, heroin, oxycodone, oxycontin, endone and codeine are narcotic analgesics.

These medications are very strong and come in many different forms. They are safe as long as you follow the advice given to you by the health professional who prescribed them for you.

What are the effects and side effects?

Ideally when you are given these medications they control (make tolerable) or at best stop the pain. There are many side effects, and some are less desirable than others.

- dizziness, light-headedness, or feeling faint
- drowsiness
- nausea or vomiting
- tiredness or weakness
- confusion
- constipation
- difficult or painful urination
- mental depression
- shortness of breath, tightness in the chest
- skin rash, or itching
- agitation

Often these side effects are related to dosing and can be managed by reducing the dose. Discuss this with your treating clinician. If you develop any of these side effects, continuing to take the medication at the prescribed dose could be harmful to you.

How do I take these medications?

You will have been given the timing and dose required for your medication (see the Pain Management Factsheet if you have one). The dose regimen is particular to you as the dose is based on your age, size and any medical conditions which you have, and other current medications you take. You can take them with or without food but never with alcohol or recreational drugs. The elderly and the very young can be very sensitive to these medications.

Narcotic analgesics interact with many other medications and you must inform your doctor about any current medications you take. Beware that over the counter medications you can buy at the chemist may interact with narcotic medications and can make you even more drowsy or increase the risk of other side effects.

Allergies

Tell your clinician if you have ever had an allergic reaction to these type of medicines or other allergies. Do not use over the counter medicines at the same time without discussing these with a health professional such as a pharmacist or doctor.

Pregnancy

These medicines have not been reported to cause birth defects. If you are pregnant discuss the pros and cons of any medication with your doctor.

Use of a narcotic during labour and delivery sometimes causes drowsiness or breathing problems in the newborn baby. If this happens, your health care professional can give the baby another medicine that will overcome these effects. Narcotics are usually not used during the delivery of premature babies.

Breast Feeding

Some narcotics have been shown to pass into the breast milk. **CODEINE SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN IF BREASTFEEDING. It can cause excessive drowsiness and breathing problems in the baby.** We recommend discussing this with your doctor.

Precautions while using this medicine

- Some people may feel drowsy, tired, or weak for up to a few days after a dose or doses of narcotic medications. Therefore, for at least 24 hours (or longer if necessary) after receiving this medicine, **do not drive**, use machines, or do anything else that could be dangerous if you are dizzy or are not alert.
- Do not drink alcoholic beverages or take other medicines that slow down the nervous system, possibly causing drowsiness, for about 24 hours unless prescribed or discussed with your doctor. Some examples below:
- Antihistamines
- Sedatives
- Tranquilizers
- Sleeping medicine
- Barbiturates
- Muscle relaxants