

## Pain Medication

### Fact sheet

Pain relieving medication forms the basis of most pain control in advanced illness.

#### Taking pain medication

Treatment with pain medication is generally designed to give you a background of relief to prevent pain from occurring.

Some medications are 'slow release' and long acting, and work for 12 to 24 hours whilst others are 'quick release' and work for a shorter time.

Slow release medication is taken at regular times so that the amount of medication in the blood stays high enough to be constant and effective.

**A principle for using pain medication is the right drug, in the right dose, at the right time.**

When you start on a morphine type medication, you will usually be given the more short acting medication so that your dose can be adjusted quickly and easily until you are comfortable.

You will need to keep a note how much you have, when you take it, and how effective it is.

Once you know how much you need to keep your pain under control, your doctor can give you slow release tablets containing enough medication to control your pain for 12 - 24 hours.

This gives you better pain control, and is easier than taking tablets every 4 hours or so.

#### Breakthrough pain

Breakthrough pain is pain you might have despite taking your routine slow release pain relief medication. This can happen for a variety of reasons – e.g. a particular activity might bring on pain.

Your doctor may prescribe quick release medication to take for breakthrough pain.

- Write down how many times a day you need to use the breakthrough medication.
- Let your doctor or nurse know if you are using the breakthrough medication more than twice a day. Your routine medication may need adjusting.

#### Types of pain medication

The types of medication recommended and prescribed will vary according to the cause or causes of your pain. Medication needs to target the type of pain you have, and the severity of that pain.

The most commonly prescribed pain medications are known as analgesics, and co-analgesics or adjuvant medicines.

## **Analgesics**

These include paracetamol and a group of drugs called opioids e.g. morphine and morphine like drugs such as codeine, oxycodone, hydromorphone and methadone.

These target pain directly, mimicking the action of the body's own pain relieving chemicals such as endorphins.

Opioids act by attaching to specific proteins called opioid receptors, which are found in the brain, spinal cord, and gastrointestinal tract. When these drugs attach to opioid receptors in the brain and spinal cord they can block the sending of pain messages to the brain.

## **Co analgesics or adjuvant medicines**

These medicines have been developed for conditions such as arthritis, epilepsy, or depression, but have been proven to be useful for types of pain where analgesics are less effective. Examples are

- Non Steroidal Anti Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs), which work by relieving pressure or inflammation. They do this by reducing the production of prostaglandins, substances the body produces when it is injured, and which cause inflammation and therefore swelling.
- Steroids, which are more powerful anti-inflammatory medicines.
- Anti epileptics or antidepressants which work by reducing the pain signals from damaged nerves.

## **Side effects of medication**

### **Analgesics**

The most common side effects of analgesic (pain) medication are nausea, drowsiness and constipation.

Nausea and drowsiness usually lessen as your body adjusts to the medication, and nausea can be controlled with anti sickness medicine.

Constipation does not lessen over time, and causes significant discomfort. You will need to take bowel medication on a daily basis, unless you are told otherwise.

Remind your doctor to prescribe laxatives at the same time as prescribing pain medication.

Constipation can cause significant problems so always let your doctor or nurse know if you are having trouble opening your bowels. As a general rule bowels should be opened normally at least every 3 days.

**Non Steroidal Anti Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)** can irritate your stomach and interact with some other medications.

**Steroids** have a number of side effects including weight gain, sleeplessness, stomach irritation, and muscle weakness if used long term.

**Anti epileptic and antidepressant** medication side effects can include drowsiness, dizziness, dry mouth and mild constipation.

It is important to let your doctor or nurse know if you have any problems with your medicine, so that they can find ways to help manage the side effects, or review the type of medication you are prescribed.

## **Related fact sheets**

Pain and Pain Relief FAQs

My pain chart

My pain diary

Constipation

## **Other Resources**

Information booklets about morphine are available from your palliative care team.

<http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk/> has excellent information about pain. And pain management

## **CONTACT DETAILS**

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