

Understanding Opioids for Pain in Hospice: A Patient & Caregiver Guide

What Is Pain?

Pain can be any unpleasant sensation or emotion that causes suffering or distress. It can disturb sleep, reduce appetite, and make daily activities difficult.

- Not everyone who is terminally ill will have pain
- Pain is different for everyone
- Most pain can be relieved
- The degree of pain can vary with time of day, mood, and life situation

Pain can be described using a rating scale. Most people use a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst pain. If pain starts or worsens for you or your loved one, talk to your hospice team about your options.

Opioid Medicines

Pain is often treated with opioid medicines. Opioid medicines are not available over the counter. They are only available with a prescription.

Here is a list of commonly used opioid medicines:

- Morphine (MSContin®, Kadian®, Roxanol®, MSIR®)
- Fentanyl (Duragesic®)
- Codeine/Acetaminophen (Tylenol w/Codeine®)
- Tramadol (Ultram®)
- Oxycodone/Acetaminophen (Percocet®)
- Hydromorphone (Dilaudid®)
- Oxycodone (OxyContin®, OxyIR®, OxyFast®)
- Hydrocodone/Acetaminophen (Norco®, Vicodin®, Lortab®, Hycet®)

Some opioids work on a scheduled basis and others work quickly, and can be given as needed. Opioid medicines that work quickly can be given for increasing or intense pain. Be sure your hospice team shows you how to correctly take or give your opioid medicines if pain increases.

These are signs that you or your loved one may need more pain medicine:

- Pain increases
- Feeling very restless
- Face grimacing
- Groaning
- Sensitive to physical touch

How Do Opioids Differ?

Opioid medicines can vary by:

- How much relief they provide
- How long they provide relief
- How they are taken (by mouth, injections, infusions, skin patches)
- How fast they work to relieve pain
- The severity of their side effects

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Side Effects of Opioids

Opioids can decrease pain but can also have side effects. Side effects are unwanted or undesired changes that can happen in the body.

Some common side effects include:

- Feeling sleepy or drowsy
- Itchy skin
- Dry mouth
- Constipation that does not go away
- Nausea and vomiting

If you experience any of these side effects, especially constipation, speak to your hospice team about treatment options.

Concerns about an Opioid Allergy

These are signs of a true opioid allergy and/or serious side effects:

- Severe rash with bumps that itches or has pus
- Trouble breathing
- Loss of consciousness
- Swelling in the face
- Sudden severe dizziness

Concerns about Taking Opioids

Morphine and other opioids are good for relieving pain and improving quality of life during the dying process. These medicines can possibly improve mood, energy, and appetite at end of life. Opioids do not cause patients to die sooner or more quickly.

Be sure to contact your hospice team if you have additional questions or concerns about opioids.

References:

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