

Methadone for Opioid Dependence

Methadone (also called juice or meth) is a synthetic (human made) opioid. It is used to treat dependence on other opioids such as morphine and heroin. Some opioids may be prescribed (for example, morphine) and some are obtained illegally (for example, heroin).

What are opioids and what is methadone maintenance treatment and recovery?

Opioids are prescribed to lessen cough, diarrhea or pain. They are misused when taken to feel pleasure. Regular misuse can cause a person to develop a dependency on these drugs. It becomes very hard for people dependent on these drugs to quit without treatment and counselling because they can feel pain, anxiety and/or strong cravings for more opioids.

When people who are dependent on opioids suddenly stop taking them, they can have withdrawal symptoms (such as shakes, fever/chills, change in bowel function, sleeplessness, sweating, irritability and weakness). These symptoms can make a person feel unable to stop using opioids.

Methadone maintenance treatment and recovery can help a person get back to living their life. It involves the prescribing of methadone, counselling, case management and other medical and psychosocial services.

Methadone maintenance treatment and recovery is not a cure; it allows people to deal with issues related to their opioid dependence and helps them live their lives.

Why and how is methadone used for treatment?

Methadone is a special type of opioid that works by blocking craving and withdrawal symptoms that can occur when other opioids are stopped.

Addictions Counsellors provide information, assess a person's situation and may make a referral to a doctor who is approved to prescribe methadone. Methadone can be effective and safe to use when taken as prescribed and when a person regularly visits their health care provider and addictions counsellor. Once prescribed, a person will take methadone in the presence of a nurse or pharmacist, usually in the form of an orange drink.

Methadone stops craving and withdrawal symptoms for 24 to 36 hours, so people usually take it once a day at the same time.

Prescribed methadone can help:

- improve memory and the ability to focus;
- improve physical and mental health;
- reduce the likelihood of overdosing from opioid use; and
- reduce harm to the community such as criminal activity and the spread of diseases from sharing needles (e.g. HIV, Hepatitis C).

How long does treatment last?

It can take many months for treatment with methadone to be fully effective. Treatment is more effective when the person is motivated to succeed. A person may slowly take less and less under a doctor's care and monitoring. However, if a person continues to benefit from being on methadone, she/he may stay on it for years.

What are the side effects and cautions of taking methadone?

Side effects may include:

- gaining weight;
- constipation;
- nausea or vomiting;
- feeling drowsy or light headed;
- sweating a lot;
- inability to sleep;
- feeling restless; and
- skin rash or itchiness.

There are other more serious side effects not listed here that can be discussed with a health care provider.

Side effects are usually felt at the start of treatment but often go away once the right dose is found.

Methadone use can be dangerous if:

- doctor's instructions are not followed;
- it is used by someone it is not prescribed for;
- it is used by children;
- it is taken with alcohol or other drugs; and
- more of the drug is taken than the body is used to.

NOTE: This material is for information only and should not replace the advice from an Addictions or Mental Health Counsellor, doctor or other health care provider.

To access fact sheet sources please contact the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health at (306)787-7239.

Recovering from opioid dependence

Methadone maintenance treatment and recovery helps individuals achieve many goals. This includes:

- dealing with anger and other emotions;
- coping with stress;
- problem-solving;
- enhancing life skills;
- relapse prevention; and
- connecting to community supports (e.g. child care, housing, transportation, parenting supports, food security, literacy, employment and financial support).

Using methadone and going to counselling together are helpful in reaching many goals.

Who can you contact if you need help regarding drug use?

Contact your local Addictions/Mental Health Services office, doctor or other health care provider if you need more information. To locate services near you:

- Visit saskatchewan.ca/addictions.
- Visit HealthLine Online at www.healthlineonline.ca.
- Call HealthLine 811. Specially trained staff are available to provide mental health and addictions crisis support, in a safe and confidential manner.

