

Treating Your Opioid Dependence

Methadone is used to treat dependence on 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?

Opioids are prescribed by doctors to lessen pain, cough or diarrhea and for treatment of addiction to other opioids. These drugs are misused when taken to feel pleasure. Regular misuse can cause you to feel that you need it and it can become very hard to quit. When you stop using the drug, it can cause you to feel pain, anxiety and/or crave more opioids. You might feel shaky, weak and nauseous; have fever/chills, muscle aches or bone pain; and experience changes to bowel function, sleeplessness, sweating, irritability and vomiting. This may make you feel like using the drug again to avoid these feelings.

Methadone maintenance treatment and recovery is not a cure; it allows you to deal with issues related to your opioid dependence and helps you live your life.

How and why is methadone used to treat opioid dependence?

Methadone works for 24-36 hours by blocking the negative feelings you get when you don't take an opioid, without giving you a high.

Methadone maintenance treatment and recovery can help improve memory, focus, and your physical and mental health. It can also help reduce the harmful effects of opioid use, such as overdose or the spread of diseases like Hepatitis C or HIV.

How do I get in the methadone program?

Methadone can only be prescribed by authorized doctors. Before being prescribed methadone, you need to talk with your family doctor or an Addictions Counsellor. That person may refer you to another doctor who can decide whether or not to prescribe you the drug. The doctor will decide if you are to go on methadone, but there will be other people involved in your care while you are in the program, including an Addictions Counsellor and a pharmacist.

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

You will be required to provide urine samples and meet with a health care provider or doctor on a fairly regular basis while you are in the program.

How do I take methadone?

You usually take methadone at the same time every day. When you start, you will take your dose in front of a nurse or pharmacist, usually in the form of an orange drink. After a period of time, you and your doctor can talk about taking your dose home with you. This is called a carry. Follow all of your doctor's or pharmacist's instructions about how to store and take your dose. Keep it away from children, as even a very tiny dose can result in death.

How long does treatment last?

It can take many months for treatment to work. You may stay on methadone as long as it is helping you. If you wish to stop, talk to your doctor about slowly taking less and less (tapering) to wean you off. If you are not following the rules of the program, or if it becomes unsafe for you, your doctor can decide to stop treatment.

Once you are prescribed methadone, there are rules you must follow, which your care team will talk about with you.

What are the side effects and cautions of taking methadone?

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

They 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.

Mixing methadone with other drugs or alcohol can be dangerous. Talk to your doctor or health care provider before taking any other drugs or alcohol.

Methadone is a very powerful drug and is dangerous if it is not taken properly. It is important to:

- follow your doctor's instructions about how much to take;
- never let anyone else take your dose; and
- tell your health care provider if you use other drugs or alcohol, no matter what type.

Can I take methadone if I am pregnant?

Tell your doctor or health care provider if you are pregnant. If you misuse opioids and are pregnant, methadone may help decrease the risk of giving birth early or having a miscarriage.

Methadone can also help you stabilize your life so that you can better prepare for the major life change a baby will bring. It can help you make the best decisions for you and your child. If you have *any* concerns about its effect on your baby, talk to your doctor or health care provider.

Who can you contact if you need help, or to assess if methadone is right for you?

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.



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.