



Scan to watch a patient's experience with opioid use



# Opioids *in* Palliative Care

A Quick Guide for Patients and Caregivers

## Your opinion matters

Have an open conversation with your care team about how well your symptoms are managed. Use the medications only as prescribed. Keeping a record of when they are used will help.

For more resources on palliative care, visit [singaporehospice.org.sg](http://singaporehospice.org.sg)

## About Us

Established in 1995, Singapore Hospice Council is a registered charity and an Institution of a Public Character (IPC). We are an umbrella body representing organisations that actively provide hospice and palliative care in Singapore. For more information, visit [singaporehospice.org.sg](http://singaporehospice.org.sg).

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## What are Opioids?

- Opioids are prescribed for difficult-to-control pain and breathlessness
- They come in different formulations such as tablets, patches, injections or liquid
- Commonly used opioids: Codeine, Tramadol, Morphine, Fentanyl and Oxycodone

## Common Side Effects of Opioids

Not everyone experiences side effects from opioids. These side effects are expected, temporary and may wear off or can be managed with medications. They do not warrant the stopping of opioid use.

### **Constipation**

Opioids are usually given with laxatives to prevent or relieve constipation.

### **Nausea and vomiting**

Can happen when opioids are first started. Anti-vomiting medications can be prescribed.

### **Drowsiness/giddiness**

Common when opioids are first started. It improves over time.

### **Dry mouth**

Mouth moisturisers such as lip balm or frequent sips of water and gargling will help.

## Common Fears about Opioids

### **Opioids hasten death**

Opioids, if used as prescribed, do not shorten your life span. They are prescribed to optimise comfort and improve quality of life.

### **Opioids are addictive**

Addiction rarely happen in people who take opioids for illness. Opioids, if used as prescribed or as instructed by your medical team, do not usually result in addiction.

### **Opioids mask my pain and condition**

Ignoring the pain does not make your illness go away, and good pain control does not mask your condition. Besides pain, there are other symptoms and investigations that are more reliable in assessing your condition.

### **Opioids should be taken only when you can't stand the pain anymore**

Some people think that pain is an inevitable part of illness. Some may wait until their pain reaches an intolerable level before doing something about it. In fact, pain is more effectively managed sooner rather than later.

### **There is a usual or normal dose of opioids**

The right dose of opioids is the dose that relieves the pain or breathlessness with minimal or tolerable side effects.

### **Taking opioids means I am weak**

People experience pain differently and need different doses of medicine to relieve pain. Using more or less medicine than someone else does not reflect your character or ability to tolerate pain. Sometimes, it is necessary to steadily increase the dose of opioids needed. Dosages are adjusted based on the individual situation.

### **Opioid is the only option left for me**

When opioids alone cannot achieve good symptom control, other medications can be added.

### **Taking opioids means death is approaching**

The right time to start opioids is the time when you have pain bad enough to need them. This is not related to how long you are going to live.