


Taking opioids to treat breathlessness





This leaflet gives you general information about taking opioids for breathlessness. It does not replace the need for personal advice from a qualified healthcare professional. Please also speak to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about these medicines.

What are opioids?

Opioids are morphine-based medicines. Morphine is a strong painkiller.

Opioids are commonly used to treat moderate to severe pain. In small doses they are also used to treat long-term breathlessness. Opioids have been used as a treatment for breathlessness for many years. They are proven to be effective and safe.

Opioids should make your breathing feel easier and you may also feel more relaxed. If you feel that there is no improvement in your breathing, please tell your doctor as opioids do not work for everyone.

The opioids that are most commonly used for breathlessness are:

- Oramorph® – liquid morphine
- OxyNorm® – liquid/capsule oxycodone

How should I take opioids?

Opioids can be taken in different ways. Your doctor or nurse may tell you to take opioids:

- regularly
- as needed
- before activities that may cause breathlessness

Oramorph®/OxyNorm® should work within 30 minutes of taking them.

The dose of
Oramorph® (10mg
in 5ml) / OxyNorm®
(5mg in 5ml) [delete
as appropriate]

prescribed for you is: _____ mg

This measures: _____ ml

The maximum dose
you should take in
24 hours is:

_____ mg

You should use an oral syringe to measure your opioid dose. If you have not been given an oral syringe, please ask your local pharmacist.

Are there any side effects?

Yes, but only some patients suffer from side effects. Common side effects include:

- feeling sick
- constipation
- dry mouth
- drowsiness
- itching

If you are concerned about any possible side effects, or experience any side effects, please speak to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

Frequently asked questions

Can I drive while taking opioids?

You may be able to drive if you have been on the same dose for 5 days and are not feeling drowsy.

You should not drive if the opioids make you feel drowsy. Please discuss this further with the healthcare professional who prescribed the opioids for you.

Can I drink alcohol while taking opioids?

- Combining alcohol and opioids can cause sleepiness and poor concentration.

- You should avoid alcohol completely when you first start on opioids or when your dose has just been increased.
- If you are taking opioids, you should avoid alcohol if you are going to drive or use tools or machines.
- When you are settled on a steady dose of opioids, you should be able to drink modest amounts of alcohol without getting rarer side effects, such as confusion and slowed rate of breathing.

Can I get addicted to opioids?

The amount of opioids used to treat breathlessness should not cause addiction. However, over time you may find opioids do not work as well as they did in the beginning.

This happens because your body adjusts to them. This is known as building tolerance. It is important that opioids are stopped gradually if they no longer benefit you, or if you no longer need them.

I thought opioids were only used when patients are at the end of life?

Opioids are used to treat severe pain at any stage of life. Opioids can also be used safely for other reasons, including for treating breathlessness.



I thought oxygen would mainly be used to treat breathlessness?

Oxygen is used to correct low oxygen levels and reduce the strain on your heart and lungs. However, you can have normal oxygen levels and still be very breathless, which is why we use other treatments such as opioids.

The leaflet in the medicine package says that you should not take Oramorph®/ OxyNorm® if you have breathing problems – why have I been given it?

This is only a potential problem if you need to take very large doses of these opioids to treat pain. You have been given a very low dose as it is being used to treat breathlessness, not pain.

Your doctor has carefully prescribed the right opioid and dose for you. Please speak to your doctor or nurse if you have any further concerns.

Who can I contact for advice?

Pharmacy patient helpline

Tel: **020 7351 8901**

Monday to Friday, 9am to 5.30pm

Harefield Hospital

Supportive and palliative care

Tel: **01895 828 922**

Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm

Royal Brompton Hospital

Supportive and palliative care

Tel: **020 7352 8121** extension **84737**

Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm

You can also contact your GP if you have questions about your medicines.

If you have concerns about any aspect of the service you have received in hospital and feel unable to talk to those people responsible for your care, call the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on:

- Royal Brompton Hospital – 020 7349 7715
- Harefield Hospital – 01895 826 572

You can also email gstt.rbhh-pals@nhs.net. This is a confidential service.

Royal Brompton Hospital
Sydney Street
London
SW3 6NP
Phone: 0330 12 88121

Harefield Hospital
Hill End Road
Harefield
Middlesex
UB9 6JH
Phone: 0330 12 88121

Website: www.rbht.nhs.uk

Royal Brompton and Harefield
hospitals are part of Guy's and
St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

إذا كنت ترغب في الحصول على ترجمة فورية لمضمون هذه الوثيقة إلى اللغة العربية،
يرجى منك الاتصال بأحد مستخدمي جناح المصلحة التي يتم فيها استشفائك. أحد موظفينا
سيسعى لترتيب إجراءات الترجمة وإتمامها في الوقت المناسب لك.

Brosurteki bilginin Türkçe tercumesi için
tedavi görüyor olduğunuz boluma bas
vurunuz. Bolum personeli tercumenin
gerçekleşmesini en kısa zamanda
ayarlacaktır.

Date published: December 2022

Review date: December 2025

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