

# Using Narcotics Safely

Opioids, which are commonly referred to as narcotics, can include medications such as: morphine, oxycodone, hydromorphone, methadone and fentanyl.

Opioids are used to treat certain kinds of chronic pain as well as ease shortness of breath and coughing. Not all types of pain will respond to opioid medications. For instance, pain caused by damage to nerves or bones is treated more effectively by non-narcotic medicines. The important thing to remember is that each person's pain is unique and most pain can be controlled or at least eased by effective pain management. If you, or a loved one, has uncontrolled pain, continue to ask your healthcare providers what can be done to ease the pain.

## *Pain can be safely controlled.*

Many people believe that opioid medications, like morphine, given to a person nearing the end of life may cause them to die more quickly. However, there is no scientific

evidence that giving safe doses of morphine to a person in the dying process hastens their death.

## *Ongoing pain needs ongoing medication.*

Opioids are most effective when taken on a regular (around the clock) schedule to keep the pain under control and minimize side effects. Physicians typically prescribe an oral (by mouth) long-acting formula for reliable pain relief. Additionally a quick release opioid can be given to "rescue" someone from an increase in pain that occurs before the next scheduled long-acting dose is due.



Used as directed, opioids are safe and effective.

It is important to take opioids, and all medicines, as your doctor directs. Because opioids are chemically similar to the natural endorphins produced in the body, most people adjust to opioid medications well. Side effects, such as a decrease in the breathing rate are minimal when opioids are given at the right time in the correct dose. At the end of life, changes in vital signs including blood pressure, breathing and heart rate are usually indications of the natural process of dying and not indications of opioid toxicity.

Opioids can safely be administered by a pain pump.

If pain needs to be controlled fairly quickly, a pump may be used to provide a constant supply of the opioid and steady pain relief.

- ✎ Using a button on the pump the person can self-administer an additional dose calculated to safely relieve pain
- ✎ Intravenous (IV) opioids act quickly but a single dose lasts only about 15 minutes
- ✎ The pump is designed so that pushing the button repeatedly will only release the programmed dose of medication about every 15 minutes
- ✎ If needed the opioid dose can be safely increased every 8 to 12 hours

Hospice and palliative care professionals have extensive training and experience in the treatment of pain and other uncomfortable symptoms associated with serious illness and advancing disease.

For more information, please contact Caring Connections at 800.658.8898, [caringinfo@nhpco.org](mailto:caringinfo@nhpco.org) or visit [www.caringinfo.org](http://www.caringinfo.org).

