

Opiod Pain Medications

What is happening

Pain and shortness of breath are common symptoms in serious illness.

When these symptoms become moderate or severe, opioid medications are often used to improve comfort.

Why these medications are used

Opioid medications help to:

- Decrease pain
- Improve comfort and rest
- Allow better movement and activity
- Reduce the feeling of shortness of breath

These medications are commonly and safely used in hospice care when monitored appropriately.

What you may see

When pain is improved, patients may:

- Rest more comfortably
- Breathe more easily
- Be calmer and less distressed
- Sleep better
- Move more comfortably

Common medications

- Morphine
- Oxycodone
- Hydrocodone / Norco
- Fentanyl
- Methadone

The hospice team will determine which medication is most appropriate.

How to give these medications

- Usually taken **by mouth**
- Some forms are liquids and may work more quickly

- Medications may be given:
 - On a regular schedule
 - Or as needed for pain or shortness of breath

Your hospice nurse will explain:

- How often the medication can be given
- When additional doses are appropriate

When it should work

- Many opioid medications begin working within **about 30 minutes**
- Liquid forms may work faster

Common side effects

Constipation

Constipation is very common with opioids.

A laxative is usually needed while taking these medications.

Your hospice team will help guide this.

Sleepiness or confusion

Mild sleepiness or confusion can occur, especially when starting the medication or increasing the dose.

This often improves over time.

Itching

Itching can occur and does not usually mean an allergy.

Ask the hospice team if treatment is needed.

Safety considerations

While taking opioid medications:

- Do not drink alcohol
- Do not drive or operate machinery

Always follow the hospice team's instructions carefully.

When to call hospice

- The patient is difficult or unable to wake
- Breathing becomes unusually slow, weak, or concerning
- Pain remains uncontrolled despite medication
- Severe constipation or inability to have a bowel movement
- Severe stomach pain or cramping
- You are unsure when or how to give the medication