



## FACT SHEET 2

# How can I support the person I'm caring for with taking their opioid medicines?

Strong medications such as opioid medicines may be needed by people to relieve pain for a range of reasons. Sometimes people don't understand the risks involved in taking opioid medicines. Less than 1 in 5 people using these medicines take them in a safe and effective way.

With the right information you can support someone to take their opioid medicines safely. To start, it's important to know if the person you care for is taking opioid medicines. If you're not sure whether they're taking opioids, find out more in [Factsheet 1: How do I know if the person I'm caring for is taking opioid medicines?](#)

If the person you're caring for is interested in other ways of reducing pain, find out more on the Carers Australia opioid information webpage at <https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/opioids-information/caring-for-someone-living-with-pain/>

**Alternatively, more tips for carers and people with pain can be found here:**

- National Pain Week at <http://www.nationalpainweek.org.au/>
- Australian Pain Management Association at <https://www.painmanagement.org.au/>
- Chronic Pain Australia at <http://chronicpainaustralia.org.au/index.php>
- Pain Australia at <http://www.painaustralia.org.au/>

## Here are 3 ways you can support the person you're caring for to take their opioid medicines.



### 1. Understand their medicine.

You'll find that opioid medicines come with an information sheet called a Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet. It's usually provided by the pharmacist giving the medicines. If you weren't given one of these, ask the pharmacist or look it up online with the NPS MedicineWise Medicine Finder at <http://nps.org.au/medicine-finder>.

The medicine packet will have directions on the correct amount to take and how to store the medicines. The doctor will also have given instructions on how much medicine to take and when.

Knowing the right amount of medicine to be taken each time, and when to take it is really important. If medicines are taken more often than recommended, they can cause an overdose.

Check in regularly with the person you care for to understand how the medication is (or isn't) helping with their pain.

If people continue to take opioid medicines when they are not needed this can cause side-effects or even dependence. Over time people can develop a tolerance to opioid medicines. This may make it seem like the medicines are not working anymore. The person taking the opioids may want to take more to reduce their pain.



### 2. Know the risks and side effects.

Opioid medicines can cause dependence. They are not recommended for using over a long time except in special circumstances, such as cancer and palliative (end of life) care.

The prescriber or pharmacist will specify the dose and over what time period the medication should be taken for. If opioids are taken over a longer period than prescribed, it can risk health issues or possible overdose. You may need to support the person you care for to be aware of their alcohol and other drug use if they are taking opioid medicines.

**If you are worried someone is taking their opioid medicines unsafely (see Factsheet 3),** there is support available.

Opioid medicines can result in unwanted side effects. These can include;

- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Breathing difficulties
- Constipation
- Depression

The information sheet that comes with the opioid medicines will outline how they should be used and any potential side effects.



### 3. Encourage communication with their doctor or health team.

It can be helpful to attend doctor's appointments with the person you care for. As a carer, you can help by writing down important information that is talked about, in case you need to follow up later. You can also ask the doctor questions to help you better understand the medicine and how to help the person take them safely.

Aside from cancer treatment and palliative care, opioids are usually only prescribed for short periods of time. It's important for the person you care for to be open and honest with their doctor about their pain, and if the opioid medicines are helping or not. This way you can have a conversation about whether opioid medicines are still the right medication to be taking or if there are other options.

Ideally, the person taking opioid medicines will have a pain management plan. This will help you both understand how the use of opioids fits into their plan and what other options there are to manage pain. This plan may include a timeframe to reduce (and eventually stop) the use of opioid medicines. If the person you're caring for does not have a pain management plan, ask for one.

People can become addicted to opioid medicines over time if not used properly. In such a case, it's really important you both talk to the doctor about a safe and supported way to reduce opioid use. This can help to avoid withdrawal symptoms, such as sweating, hot and cold flushes, aches and pains, nausea, and anxiety.

See the Health Direct website for more information.

<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/opioid-medicines#withdrawal-symptoms>

Keep talking to the person you care for about their pain. There may be other options to relieve pain. Look at the Health Direct website for more information:

<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/options-for-managing-chronic-pain>

**Remember! Seek support from your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions about how to help someone take their opioid medicines.**

**Visit the Carer Gateway website at <https://www.carergateway.gov.au/help-advice> or call them on 1800 422 737 to find local services and support for carers.**

**Check out [Factsheet 3](#) to find out what you can do to help if you feel someone is not using their opioid medicine safely.**

All factsheets referenced above can be found at <https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/opioids-information/caring-for-someone-living-with-pain>.