



FACT SHEET 4

Will the person I'm caring for still have access to opioid medicines?

Opioids can help relieve pain.

Opioids may be effective over short periods. Occasionally they work for longer periods to relieve pain in serious conditions, e.g. cancer. But, generally using opioids over a long time for chronic non-cancer pain can risk harm and can be addictive.

If you're caring for someone who takes opioids, you can help by understanding how to use opioids safely. See [Factsheet 3: How can I identify if a person I'm caring for is not using their opioid medicines safely?](#)

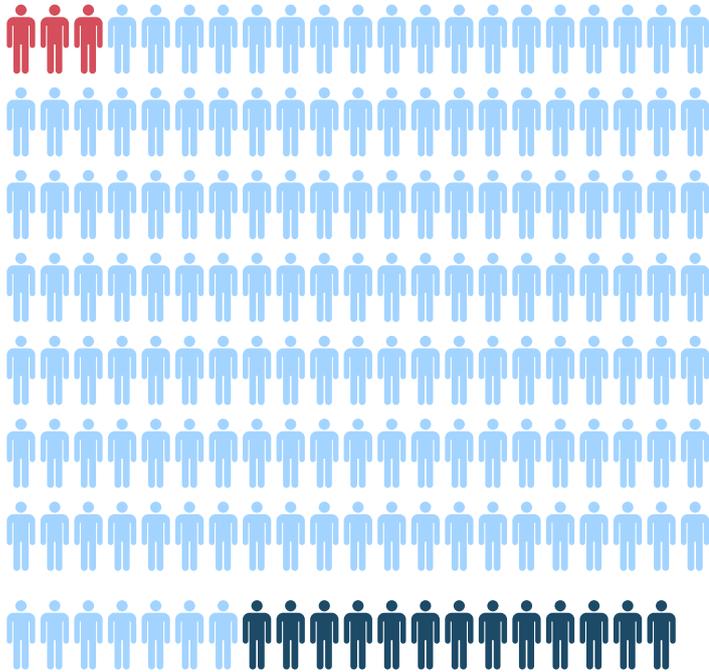
Prescriptions for opioid medications

Due to the risk of harm and possible addiction, opioids are no longer available 'over the counter' in a pharmacy. They're only available with a prescription from a doctor who will explain how long it's safe to take opioids and how to avoid unsafe use.

The doctor will make sure they fully understand a person's medical history, family and personal situation before prescribing opioids. They'll monitor the use at future appointments. As their carer, it can be useful to go to appointments with the person you're caring for so you can find out more about their medication.

Getting opioids

The Australian Department of Health has introduced new requirements to get opioid medicines. Their role is to protect the public's health and prioritise patient safety. This includes reducing harms associated with inappropriate use of prescription opioids.



Every day in Australia, an average of 3 people die, 150 people are hospitalised and 14 people present to emergency departments because of harm from opioids.

[NPS MedicineWise](#) (2020)

The new requirements aim to cut down on overall opioid use and include:

- Introduction of additional smaller opioid pack sizes,
- Increased restrictions for larger pack sizes,
- Information and clear warnings about potential harm,
- Tightening the conditions to get prescriptions for opioids.

The measures are based on expert advice from specialists in the field of opioid medications (Opioid Regulatory Advisory Group (ORAG).

These changes apply to all opioids. Because of the new requirements, it might seem more difficult for the person you're caring for to get opioid medicines.

What should the person you're caring for know about the changes?

If the person you're caring for uses opioids, they may be worried the changes will stop them from getting their medicines. It won't stop them, but they'll probably notice some changes.

- Experts continue to consider opioids as important and effective medicines in the treatment of short-term pain relief. They continue to monitor the benefits and risks of opioid medicines.
- Changes are being made because harmful use of opioids in Australia has been rising.
- The same opioids are available, but health professionals will now prescribe smaller pack sizes for short-term pain and check updated patient requirements before prescribing.

- Smaller pack sizes reduce the risk of harm from unused opioids.
- Any unused opioids should be returned to a local pharmacy.
- Updated patient criteria will help reduce the unsafe or incorrect use of the most powerful opioids (such as fentanyl).
- People who require long-term pain relief using opioids, such as people with cancer and those receiving palliative (end of life) care, are likely to receive the same opioid medicine and pack size as they did before.
- Stopping opioids suddenly can lead to withdrawal symptoms. People should continue to take their pain medicine but speak with their doctor about alternative options or reducing their dose, in case it's no longer appropriate.

Adapted from NPSMedicine at <https://www.nps.org.au/radar/articles/opioids-new-and-amended-pbs-listings#r15>.

New information on warnings

Healthcare professionals will discuss warnings with patients taking or planning to take opioids. This includes information on the dose, how to take the medicine, how long it should last, and stronger warnings about the risk of dependence and addiction. As their carer it can be useful to be part of these discussions.

Additional warnings will be added to the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet to make it clear opioids can cause addiction and withdrawal symptoms if stopped suddenly.

A new warning label will be placed on the packaging of opioid products when given by pharmacists.

If you're caring for someone who uses opioids and you have questions about the medicine or side effects, talk to the person who prescribed the medicine or to a pharmacist.

Remember! Keep talking to the person you care for about their pain. There may be other options to relieve pain.

Options for managing long-term (chronic) pain are available on the Health Direct website at <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/options-for-managing-chronic-pain>.

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