
Pain Medicine for the Person Receiving Palliative Care



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For many people, the thought of extreme pain can be frightening. However, most pain can be controlled with medicines like morphine.

Both 'narcotic' and 'opioid' are words used to describe the same class of medications. Many people see and hear the word 'narcotic' as negative or bad. Because of this, you may notice healthcare workers using the word 'opioid'.

People who think this medicine is bad may be afraid of overdosing, experiencing terrible side effects, or becoming addicted. Many of these myths are based on false information.

It is important to know the truth about opioid medicine, so that patients and physicians will not be afraid to use it appropriately to control pain.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to explain some of the common myths about using these drugs to control pain.

Myth: Opioids are only used for people who are very close to death.

Truth: Opioids control pain very well. They can be used at any stage of a disease where pain needs to be controlled. Everyone feels pain

differently. Some people may never need opioids, while others may need them for a longer period of time.

Myth: People who use morphine or other opioids will become addicted to them.

Truth: Addiction is a psychological craving or desire for a drug. When patients use morphine to control pain, it is not likely that they will develop an addiction. However, patients can develop a physical dependence to opioids. This can be treated. When the patient no longer needs pain medication, the doctor will slowly reduce the dose over time to prevent the side effects of withdrawal.

Myth: People should only use morphine when their pain is extremely bad, otherwise it will not work when it is really needed.

Truth: The body can get used to certain drugs, which makes them less effective over time. This is called tolerance. Fortunately, opioids do not have an "upper dose limit". This means it is unlikely for the patient to develop a tolerance to narcotics. It also means people do

not need to live with pain. Doctors will simply increase the medicine to treat the pain, as it gets worse.

Myth: Opioids slow down a person's breathing, causing them to die sooner.

Truth: Patients with severe pain rarely have breathing problems when they use these drugs to control pain. In fact, patients with breathing problems near the end of life are often given opioids because it helps make their breathing more comfortable.

For more information, contact one of the following:

Palliative Care Program, London Regional Cancer Program at 519-685-8500 ext 53257.

Southwest Community Care Access Centre's Head Office at 1-800-811-5146, TTY 1-800-811-5147.

Supportive Care, London Regional Cancer Program at 519-685-8622.
