

Narcotics (Opioids)

Narcotics (opioids) are a family of medications that include codeine, oxycodone, tramadol, tapentadol, morphine, buprenorphine, methadone, pethidine and heroin. Some narcotics are still made from poppies while others are made in a laboratory.

Narcotics are useful for short-term somatic pain- like pain from the surgical cut for the first few days after an operation, or on the worst day of a period. They are a normal part of the care provided in a hospital after an operation and is usually stopped within a few days. Narcotics help reduce the pain so then people can move to help with recovery while waiting for the wound to heal or the bad period to pass. In short term, opioids can cause nausea, vomiting and constipation, although if people can tolerate it, narcotics rarely cause problems and most people who stop within a few days.

Narcotics should be avoided for long-term pain that does not come from cancer – like back or pelvic pain that has been present for weeks, months or even longer. This is when they cause problems. When narcotics are used regularly (every day) for more than eight weeks, it is considered a drug of dependence.

Why is using these medications regularly a concern?

We now know that there is a big difference between using these drugs for a few days for a short term pain, and using them regularly for a longer term pain.

When used regularly, several things can happen including:

- **They do not work as well.** Our bodies get used to the medications and need larger and larger doses, often with less and less effect on pain
- **They worsen pain.** Narcotics might help pain when first taken, but over time they sensitise nerve pathways, making pain worse.
- **They are addictive.** These drugs can change our mood – making us feel worse if we stop them. There is risk of overuse of narcotics to cope with emotional distress associated with pain, whereby someone feels they cannot function without narcotics even if they are physically capable.
- **They are dangerous.** In high doses, narcotics can stop your breathing. Drug overdose deaths from prescription medications now outnumber road fatalities in Australia. Often death was an accident and narcotics prescribed for pain are more likely to be part of the problem than illegal drugs such as heroin.
- **They have side effects.** Opioids interfere with clear thinking, cause constipation and increase nausea.

The following video looks at some of the issues around regular narcotic use and better ways of managing long term pain.

https://youtu.be/nLbX0_T9S4A?list=UUAfjSufXOnORMLMtSid6CQQ