Information for Patients and Families about Opioid Pain Medicines

Opioid medicines are used to treat pain. Opioids are also known as *narcotics*. These medicines may be needed while you are in hospital and also after you go home. This information sheet will review some important safety information about opioids.

Patients, family members, and other caregivers can play an important role in the safe use of these medicines by becoming better informed.

With opioids there is a fine balance between effective pain control and dangerous side effects.

GOAL

Safe balance between pain control and side effects

Requires regular assessment of opioid effect and need

Pain Management Not Effective	Safe Balance	Dangerous Side Effects

Examples of Opioids

GENERIC NAME	BRAND NAMES
Codeine	Tylenol #1,2,3; Atasol 8,15,30
Fentanyl	Duragesic
Hydromorphone	Dilaudid, Hydromorph Contin
Morphine	Statex, MS Contin, M-Eslon
Oxycodone	Percocet, OxyContin, OxyNEO
Tramadol	Tramacet, Ultram, Zytram XL

How is pain assessed?

- Pain scales (e.g., 0 to10) are often used to help the healthcare team assess pain and monitor the effect of pain medicines.
- *Only you* can describe the level of pain you are feeling.

Are opioids safe?

Treatment of pain is an important part of the healing process. Many people have used opioids without any problems. However, serious problems, including overdose and addiction, have happened. It is important to use the lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time and to be aware of signs that you are getting too much opioid.

Some people are more sensitive to the side effects of opioids. These people may need a lower starting dose or more careful monitoring. It's important to tell your healthcare team about any health conditions that could increase your risk.

You may be at HIGHER RISK of dangerous side effects if:

- You are older (age greater than 65)
- You have certain health conditions, for example:
  - *Sleep apnea*
  - *Lung disease (e.g., asthma, COPD)*
  - *Kidney or liver problems*
- You are already taking other opioids
- You are taking medicine for anxiety or to help you sleep
- You have never taken opioids before
- You have had a bad reaction to an opioid before

When should I contact my healthcare team?

Signs that the dose of opioid is too high:

- Severe dizziness
- Inability to stay awake
- Hallucinations
- Heavy or unusual snoring
- Slow breathing rate

Do not take any more opioid medicine and contact your healthcare team right away.

The following side effects happen often with opioids: *constipation, nausea, dry mouth, itchiness, sweating, and dizziness.* Contact your healthcare team if your side effects are hard to manage.

©2013 Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada

What to expect while in HOSPITAL

- *Before each dose*, your nurse will ask about your pain level and see how sleepy you are. The nurse may also check your breathing and other vital signs such as your pulse, blood pressure and oxygen level.
- Your nurse will come back, usually within an hour, to check on how you are feeling after a dose of opioid. The nurse will ask about your pain level and check your breathing.
- Over the course of the day and night, your nurse will recheck your pain level, sleepiness, breathing and other vital signs.

If an opioid is being given to you through a patient-controlled pump, *only YOU* are allowed to push the button to administer the pain medicine. This is to prevent an accidental overdose.

Use your call bell to get help right away if you feel:

- Very dizzy
- Very weak
- You are having hallucinations
- Your heart rate is slow or unusual

Or if family members observe:

- You are confused or can't speak clearly
- It is hard to wake you up
- Your lips or fingernails are purple
- You are making unusual heavy snoring, gasping, gurgling or snorting sounds while sleeping
- You are not breathing or have no heartbeat

Additional Information:

Contact Person:

Telephone Number:

What to expect when you go HOME

It is important to be aware of signs of a problem with your opioid dose after you go home.

Be sure you understand the plan for pain control *before* you leave the hospital. If you need opioids for more than a few weeks after leaving hospital, it is important to work closely with your doctor on a plan for longer term pain control.

This medicine was prescribed for *you*. Never share your opioid medicine with anyone else. Take any unused opioids back to your pharmacy for safe disposal.

Your family member or caregiver needs to call 911 if:

- You can't speak clearly when you wake up
- They can't wake you up
- Your lips or fingernails are blue or purple
- You are making unusual heavy snoring, gasping, gurgling or snorting sounds while sleeping
- You are not breathing or have no heartbeat

Stop taking your opioid medicine and contact your healthcare provider that day if you feel:

- Too sleepy to participate in normal activities (e.g., you fall asleep while eating)
- Very dizzy
- Very weak
- You are having hallucinations
- Your heart rate is slow or unusual

If you cannot reach your doctor or pharmacist, you can call your local poison information centre or health information service for advice.

If you would like to learn more about the safe use of opioids, you can watch a video at: http://youtu.be/SDMz4lqnpPk

Never leave a person alone if you are worried about them. Always get help!

©2013 Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada

Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada
www.ismp-canada.org

All reasonable precautions have been taken to verify this information. The information is shared without warranty or representation of any kind.