

Community Respiratory Specialist Team

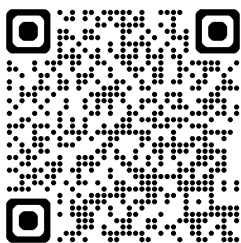
Taking Opioids to Treat Breathlessness.



**Information for people in our care,
relatives, and carers.**

Telephone: 0300 124 5909

Opening times: Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm.



Service provided by

Sirona
care & health

Introduction

This leaflet gives general information about taking opioids for breathlessness. It does not replace the need for personal advice from a qualified healthcare professional. Please speak to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about these medicines if you have any questions or concerns.

What are opioids?

Opioids are morphine-based medicines and are strong painkillers. Opioids are commonly used to treat moderate to severe pain, however, in small doses they are also used to treat long-term breathlessness.

Opioids have been used as a treatment for breathlessness for many years. They are proven to be effective and safe. Opioids should make your breathing feel easier and you may also feel more relaxed.

If you feel that there is no improvement in your breathing, please tell your doctor as opioids do not work for everyone.

The opioids that are most frequently used for breathlessness are:

- Oramorph® – liquid morphine.
- OxyNorm® – liquid or capsule oxycodone.

How should I take opioids?

Opioids can be taken in different ways. Your doctor or nurse may advise you to take opioids:

- Regularly throughout the day.
- As needed, when you feel breathless.
- In advance of activities that may cause breathlessness.

These medications usually work within 30 minutes of taking them. You should use an oral syringe to measure liquid opioid doses.

If you have not been given an oral syringe, please ask your local pharmacist.



Are there any side effects?

Yes, but only some people suffer from side effects. Common side effects include:

- Feeling sick.
- Constipation.
- dry mouth.
- Drowsiness.
- Itching.

Itching and drowsiness usually go away over time and with continued use of the medication.

If you are concerned about any possible side effects, or experience any side effects, please speak to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

Frequently asked questions

Can I drive while taking opioids?

You may be able to drive if you have been on the same dose for five days and are not feeling drowsy. You should not drive if the opioids make you feel drowsy. Please discuss this further with the healthcare professional who prescribed the opioids for you.

Can I drink alcohol while taking opioids?

Combining alcohol and opioids can cause sleepiness and poor concentration.

- You should avoid alcohol completely when you first start on opioids or when your dose has just been increased.
- If you are taking opioids, you should avoid alcohol if you are going to drive or use tools or machines.
- When you are settled on a steady dose of opioids, you should be able to drink modest amounts of alcohol without getting rarer side effects, such as confusion and slowed rate of breathing.

Can I get addicted to opioids?

Some people may worry that using a morphine-based drug will lead to addiction. The very small dose of opioids used to treat breathlessness should not cause addiction. However, over time you may find opioids do not work as well as they did in the beginning. This happens because your body adjusts to them. This is known as building tolerance. It is important that opioids are stopped gradually if they no longer benefit you, or if you no longer need them, so talk to your nurse or doctor if you wish to stop using the medication.

I thought opioids were only used when people have cancer or are at the end of life?

Opioids are used to treat severe pain at any stage of life. They can also be used safely for other reasons, including for treating breathlessness.

I thought oxygen would be used to treat breathlessness.

Oxygen is used to correct low oxygen levels and reduce the strain on your heart and lungs. However, it is possible to have normal oxygen levels and still be very breathless, which is why we use other treatments such as opioids.

The leaflet in the medicine package says that you should not take Oramorph®/ OxyNorm® if you have breathing problems – why have I been given it?

This is only a potential problem if you need to take very large doses of these opioids to treat pain. You have been given a very low dose as it is being used to treat breathlessness, not pain. Your doctor will carefully prescribe the right opioid and dose for you. Please speak to your doctor or nurse if you have any further concerns.

Contact details:

The Sirona Community Respiratory Team are available Monday-Friday 9am-5pm for help and advice on the below telephone number.

Telephone: 0300 124 5909

You can also reach out to your GP or Pharmacist if you have any questions about your medication.

Let us know what you think and get involved.

Telephone: 0300 124 5300*

Email: sirona.hello@nhs.net

Website: Link to Sirona website (sirona-cic.org.uk)

*Calls from landlines are charged up to 10p per minute; calls from mobiles vary, please check with your network provider. This is not a premium-rate number.

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Registered Office

Sirona care & health CIC,
Badminton Rd Office, 2nd Floor,
Badminton Rd, Yate, BS37 5AF
Company Number: 07585003



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