

Patient Guide: Avoiding Methadone Overdose

Methadone is a very safe drug, but accidental overdoses sometimes happen in the first two weeks of treatment. The questions and answers below will help you get through this period safely. Share this information sheet with a friend or family member.

Why can't my doctor increase my dose more quickly?

When you first start methadone, you want to get on the right dose as soon as possible. But your doctor has to increase your dose slowly over several weeks, because your body takes time to adjust to methadone, and (unlike other narcotics), methadone builds up slowly in your bloodstream over several days. A dose that may feel like too little on a Monday could put you in hospital by Thursday.

What can I take to relieve withdrawal and help me sleep until the methadone begins to work?

Only take medications that are prescribed by your methadone doctor. If you're on a medication prescribed by another doctor, your methadone doctor needs to approve it because it could interact with methadone.

Substances that make you relaxed or sleepy can be dangerous. These include alcohol, opioids, benzodiazepines (Ativan, Valium, Rivotril, etc.), antihistamines such as Gravol or Benadryl, and certain types of antidepressants and tranquilizers.

Even certain antibiotics can be dangerous, by blocking the breakdown of methadone in the body. So make sure to check all medications with your methadone physician.

Isn't methadone supposed to make you sleepy?

No. You are supposed to feel normal on methadone, not high or sleepy. Methadone builds up so slowly that someone can feel a bit sleepy during the day, lie down for a nap and not wake up. So please take the following precautions:

- Only take your methadone in the morning.
- See your doctor twice a week for the first two weeks.
- Discuss your methadone treatment with a close friend or family member. If they see that you're drowsy, they must call your methadone doctor or an ambulance.

What are some of the symptoms that my methadone dose is too high?

- You may feel sleepy, and nod off several times during the day.
- You may be forgetful.
- You may be difficult to wake up from your sleep.
- You may experience slurred speech or a stumbling walk, or appear drunk.

If these things are occurring, you must call your doctor immediately or go to the emergency room as you may be overdosing.

I've been offered a small amount of methadone by another methadone patient at the pharmacy. Is it OK to take it?

Above all, don't take any extra methadone. It could be lethal for you. Even if you took some extra once and were okay, if you do it again, you might die. Remember, it takes five days for a certain dose to build up in your blood.

Adapted from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, 2005, *Methadone Maintenance Guidelines*, Appendix H. This document is available for download as part of the OpiATE Project Toolkit: please visit methadonesaveslives.ca.