



Methadone Therapy for Chronic Pain: What to Expect

Your doctor recommends methadone therapy for you. Please read the information in this tip sheet carefully. Ask your doctor about any parts you don't understand.

What is methadone?

Methadone is a strong pain medicine. It is a synthetic (man-made) drug known as an "opioid." Doctors use it to treat chronic pain and some types of drug addictions. It works best when you use it together with self-care and other treatments. The goal of methadone therapy is to lessen pain while helping you do everyday activities.

What are the benefits?

Methadone works on receptors (special cells) in the brain and spinal cord to reduce the feeling of pain and the emotional response to pain. Methadone works well for many types of pain because of its slow start and long-lasting effect.

What are the risks?

Methadone can cause addiction. The risk is higher in people who have a history of addiction to other substances or a family history of addiction. Talk to your doctor if you have a personal history or family history of substance abuse. Methadone is a powerful medicine and can be very dangerous, even fatal, if not taken the way your doctor tells you to. Carefully follow the directions on how to take your medicine. If you cut back on or stop

this medicine abruptly (cold turkey) you may develop withdrawal symptoms. Do not adjust the dose up or down yourself without talking to your doctor or care team.

How long will methadone take to control pain?

It may take three to five days to see the full result in controlling pain. It may take five days or more for side effects to develop. If you have any side effects, please call your doctor right away.

What if I can't or don't want to take methadone?

If methadone is not for you, consult with your doctor or chronic pain team for other options or treatments to help manage your chronic pain.

What are the side effects?

Methadone causes less drowsiness, upset stomach, confusion, and constipation than other kinds of strong opioids, and the side effects usually go away with time. For example:

- constipation – many people need to take a laxative and a stool softener while taking this medicine
- nausea
- loss of appetite
- upset stomach
- feeling dizzy
- mild drowsiness
- increased sweating
- dry mouth

- flushed skin
- itchy skin

Although very rare, there may be some potential cardiac side effects like serious arrhythmias and sudden cardiac death. Your doctor may order an electrocardiogram (EKG) for screening and monitor you for these side effects.

Have more questions?

If you would like more information on methadone, you can call or email your doctor or chronic pain team. Also, visit the Drug Encyclopedia at kp.org/medications to learn more about the medicine your doctor prescribed for you.

What safety measures should I take?

- When you start this medicine or when your doctor increases the dose, it may cause drowsiness. Until you get used to the way the drug affects you, avoid driving, using heavy machinery, or doing any activity that requires you to be alert.
- If you drink alcohol, talk with your doctor before you start your methadone medicine. Mixing alcohol and opioids can lead to rapid release of the medicine and cause overdose or serious side effects including slowed breathing, coma, and death.
- Talk with your doctor before you use medicines such as tranquilizers or sleep aids.
- Do not eat grapefruit or drink grapefruit juice.

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- Carefully follow the directions on how to take your medicine. Do not adjust the dose up or down yourself without talking to your doctor or care team.
- Keep medicines in a safe place where children or pets can't get to them.
- Use birth control to prevent pregnancy and talk with your doctor if you are thinking of becoming pregnant, or are currently pregnant or breastfeeding.
- Extra doses of other pain medicines may be needed to help pain that is stronger than usual (breakthrough pain).

Overdose Information

If you think that you or someone else has taken an overdose, call your local poison control center or call 911. The amount that could cause symptoms of overdose may be different for each person. How much opioids a person has taken before, as well as how much they have taken now, might affect whether they have symptoms of overdose. Signs of overdose may include:

- slow and shallow breathing
- slow, fast, or not normal heartbeat
- feeling dizzy
- light-headedness, loss of consciousness, fainting or passing out
- very small pupils (pinpoint pupils)
- cold, clammy, or blue skin
- muscle twitching or weakness
- low body temperature
- deep sleep

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.

If you are hit, hurt or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org.

Will methadone affect how other medicines work?

Some prescription medicines or herbal remedies may not combine well with methadone. Tell your doctor if you are taking any over-the-counter medicines and herbal remedies such as St. Johns Wort. Medicines that may cause problems with methadone include:

- carbamazepine (Tegretol)
- fluoxetine (Prozac)
- fluvoxamine (Luvox)
- phenobarbital (Barbita)
- antivirals (such as Nevirapine, Ritonavir)
- rifampin (Rifadin)
- erythromycin (E-Mycin)
- phenytoin (Dilantin)
- ketoconazole (Nizoral)
- fluconazole (Diflucan)

Tips to help you remember to take your medicine

Everyone sometimes has trouble remembering to do things on a regular schedule. There are a number of ways to help you remember. Check off things you might try:

- Make a simple chart and post it in an obvious place where you will see it every day, like on the mirror in the bathroom.
- Set an alarm clock, watch, or cell phone alarm as a reminder.
- Establish a daily routine for taking your medications, such as at bedtime or mealtime.

- Use a pillbox that has sections, representing the days of the week.
- Record taking your medications on a wallet card or calendar.
- Can you think of others?

Other resources

- For information about your specific medication, visit our drug encyclopedia at kp.org/medications.
- Consult with a pharmacist if you have questions about your medicines.
- Visit your physician's home page at kp.org/mydoctor. In the left navigation bar, under "Healthy Living Resources," click on **podcasts**, **videos**, and **online programs** to learn skills to help manage your pain.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- You play the central role in managing your pain. Visit kp.org/pain for effective, self-care options, medications, and other treatments to help you feel better and remain in control of your life.