



# Methadone Therapy for Controlling Chronic Pain

Kaiser Permanente

## 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 is in the same family of drugs as morphine. Methadone works well for many types of pain because of its slow start and long lasting effect.

## How does methadone work?

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 successfully controls chronic pain.

## How is methadone prescribed?

Methadone is prescribed in a tablet form. It may be taken every 6 to 12 hours for pain relief. Your personal physician or health care professional will determine the strength and dosing schedule that is best for you. Follow the directions on your prescription label carefully. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to explain any part you do not understand. Take methadone exactly as directed.

## How long will methadone take to control pain?

It may take 3 to 5 days to see the full result in controlling pain. It may take 5 days or more for side effects to develop. If you have any side effects, please call your doctor right away.

## What are the side effects of methadone?

Methadone causes less drowsiness, upset stomach, confusion and constipation than other kinds of strong opioids, but some people still have side effects. These side effects may include:

- nausea or upset stomach
- constipation – many people need to take a laxative while taking this medication.
- drowsiness (feeling sleepy or groggy)
- confusion
- headaches

All strong pain medicines may cause these side effects. It is important to talk with your doctor or health care professional right away if you have any of these side effects.

## What if I miss a dose?

If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If it is near the time of the next dose, skip the missed dose and restart your usual dosing schedule. **Do not double the dose to catch up.**

## What safety measures should I take?

- ✓ Avoid any illegal drugs.
- ✓ Avoid alcohol.
- ✓ Do not eat grapefruit or drink grapefruit juice.
- ✓ Do not stop, lower or increase how much you take without talking with your doctor or health care professional.

- ✓ If you lessen or stop “cold turkey” the amount of this drug too quickly, you may develop withdrawal symptoms such as:
  - stomach pain
  - nausea or upset stomach
  - feeling restless or agitated
  - feeling anxious or worried
- ✓ Extra doses of other pain medicines may be needed to help pain that is stronger than usual (break-through pain).

## Will methadone affect how other medications work?

Some prescription medications 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*)
- gabapentin (*Neurontin*)
- fluoxetine (*Prozac*)
- fluvoxamine (*Luvox*)
- phenobarbital
- antivirals (such as *Nevirapine*, *Ritonavir*)
- rifampin
- erythromycin
- phenytoin (*Dilantin*)
- ketoconazole (*Nizoral*)
- fluconazole (*Diflucan*)



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## Is methadone safe?

Methadone is very safe when taken as prescribed. It will not cause damage, even when taken daily for many years. On the other hand, methadone is a powerful drug and can be very dangerous if not taken as directed. It is important to tell your doctor or health care professional right way if you are having any side effects. Like any other opioid, methadone can be habit-forming.

## Who should not take methadone?

Before taking methadone, tell your doctor or pharmacist if you are allergic to methadone or if you have any other allergies. This medication should not be used if you have certain medical conditions.

## Overdose Information

If you think that you or someone else has taken an overdose, call your local poison control center or call 911. The California poison hotline is 1(800) 222-1222. The amount that could cause symptoms of overdose may be different for each person. How much a person has taken opioids before, as well as how much they have taken now, might affect whether they have symptoms of overdose.

Signs of overdose may include:

- slow breathing
- slow heartbeat
- loss of consciousness or passing out

- very small pupils (pinpoint pupils)
- cold, clammy, or blue skin
- muscle twitching or weakness
- low body temperature
- deep sleep

Keep your methadone in the container it came in. Keep it tightly closed and out of reach of children. Store it at room temperature and away from excess heat and moisture. Do not keep this medicine in the bathroom.

## Tips for using this medicine

- Chronic pain medicines help to lessen pain and improve your ability to keep doing daily activities. They do not take the place of other treatments that your doctor may recommend.
- Know when and how to take the medicines. If you need more information, please talk with a pharmacist or with your personal physician.

## 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?

## Additional resources

- Learn more about your chronic pain medicines. Connect to our Web site at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org), click on the “Get health advice” tab, then click on “Drug encyclopedia.”
- Live your life to the fullest. Take control of your chronic pain with our HealthMedia® Care™ for Your Health online program. Connect to our Web site at [kp.org/healthylifestyles](http://kp.org/healthylifestyles) and get started today.
- Download **podcasts** to help you manage your pain. Please visit your physician’s Home Page at [kp.org/mydoctor](http://kp.org/mydoctor) for more information.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose 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 any brand name: any similar products may be used.