

MANAGING PAIN AFTER SURGERY

Good pain control is important after surgery. Pain control will keep you comfortable and improve your recovery. Taking pain medicine correctly helps to manage your pain effectively and safely.

How many types of pain medicines will you need?

Your doctor or pharmacist will discuss what and the types of pain medicines you will need. You may need more than one medicine to help control your pain. Different pain medicines relieve pain in different ways. Taking pain medication together is safe and can be more effective in reducing your pain.

Listed below are the three main types of pain-relieving medicines. We have also **marked** those that we recommend for you.

The three types of pain-relieving medicines are:

1. Paracetamol such as Panamax® or Panadol®.

Paracetamol is most effective for relieving mild pain, especially when taken regularly. It can also be used to relieve more severe pain. When you take paracetamol regularly, you reduce the need for stronger pain-relieving medicines. However, we recommend you do **not** take more than 8 paracetamol tablets in a 24-hour period.

2. Anti-inflammatories such as diclofenac (Voltaren®) or ibuprofen (Nurofen® and Rafen®).

Anti-inflammatories help reduce pain, especially when you have inflammation (swelling). They can sometimes irritate the stomach and should be taken with food. We also recommended they not be taken for more than one week, or as advised by your doctor.

If you have **asthma**, you must use anti-inflammatories carefully or as guided by your doctor. You should **stop / not take** anti-inflammatories if you:

- become dehydrated, have reflux or heartburn.
- have (or have had) a gastric ulcer, poor kidney function.

3. Opioids such as oxycodone (Endone®, OxyNorm®), tapentadol (Palexia IR®, Palexia SR®), tramadol (APO-Tramadol®) or codeine.

Opioids are strong pain relievers and come in two forms:

- immediate-release (Endone®, OxyNorm®, APO-Tramadol®, Palexia IR®, codeine) providing quick, short-term pain control; and
- slow-release (Targin®, Oxycontin®, Palexia SR®) providing pain control lasting up to 12 hours.

Are you starting any new medicines?

- All medicines can interact with pain medications. Tell your doctor or pharmacist when you start a new medicine. They also need to know what medicines you are already taking.
- Medicines can include prescriptions, herbal supplements and medicines bought over the counter.
- You can find instructions on the number of tablets to take and when to take them on the medicine label.
- Taking more than the recommended dose of any medicine can be harmful or fatal.
- Paracetamol, anti-inflammatories and opioids can be taken together to help reduce severe pain.
- Ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse if you have any questions about your medicines.

When to take your pain medicines

- Take your paracetamol and anti-inflammatory medicines regularly to help manage your pain. This can also help reduce the amount of opioid medicine you may need.
- If a slow-release opioid has been prescribed, you may also need to take this regularly for the first few days.
- Immediate-release opioids should only be used if you are still in pain while taking your other regular pain relievers.
- Do not wait for your pain to become severe before taking pain relieving medicines.
- Strong pain relievers, such as opioids, work best when taken with paracetamol and/or anti-inflammatory medicines.
- If you know an activity will increase your pain, such as showering or exercise, take your pain medicine 30 minutes to one hour before the activity. This will help reduce your pain during the activity.

How to stop taking pain medicines

To stop taking pain medicines, it is important that you use a stepwise approach. The following four steps will help make sure your pain stays well-controlled.

1. First, reduce how often you take any **slow-release opioid** medicines. If your pain continues to be well controlled, you can **stop** this medicine.
2. Next, reduce how often you take any **immediate-release opioid** medicines and then **stop**.
3. If your pain is still well controlled, you can start to reduce your **anti-inflammatory** medicines. For example, from three times a day, to twice a day, to once a day and then **stop**.
4. When you have stopped all opioids and anti-inflammatories, you can start to reduce your paracetamol. Instead of taking regular paracetamol, we suggest you only taking as needed.

What to do if you cannot manage your pain at home

If your pain is getting worse or it does not feel controlled, you should:

- visit your family doctor (GP) as you may need extra medicine; or
- visit your closest hospital Emergency Department.

General questions about your medicines can be answered by your hospital or local pharmacist.

What are the possible side effects?

Not all pain medications are suitable for everyone. All medicines can cause side effects and everyone will respond differently. Most side effects are mild, predictable and easily managed. If you are worried or have concerns, please check with your doctor, pharmacist or GP.

Common side effects when taking opioids include drowsiness, constipation, nausea or vomiting, dry mouth, and dizziness.

It is important to note that opioid side effects **increase** when/if you drink alcohol.

Drowsiness

Opioid medicines can make you drowsy and slow your reaction time. Wait and see how the medicine affects you before attempting tasks such as driving. If you have just given birth, take extra care when carrying or handling your baby.

Nausea or vomiting

Pain medicines can sometimes make you feel sick or nauseous. Taking medicine with food and plenty of water can help reduce this feeling. Your doctor can also prescribe medicines to treat severe nausea.

Constipation

Some pain-relieving medicines can cause constipation. Minimise this by staying active, drinking water, and having fibre in your diet.

Your doctor may also prescribe laxatives while you are taking an opioid medicine. Take these regularly to prevent constipation, rather than waiting until you are constipated.

You can purchase these laxatives without a prescription from your local pharmacy:

- Lactulose
- Coloxyl®
- Coloxyl® with Senna
- Movicol®

If you are concerned about becoming constipated speak to your doctor or pharmacist.

Important information:

- You cannot become addicted to paracetamol or anti-inflammatory medications.
- Addiction to opioid medicines is unlikely when used for short-term management of pain.
- If you are using opioid medicines for more than two weeks, speak to your doctor pharmacist or nurse. You may need to reduce your dose slowly rather than suddenly stopping.
- Always speak to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse if there is something you do not understand. They are here to answer any questions or concerns you have.



For more information

If you have any questions or need further advice, please call us

Department: Pharmacy Department

Mercy Hospital for Women

Phone: 03 8458 4666

Werribee Mercy Hospital

Phone: 03 8754 3546

In the event of an emergency, please dial **000** for an ambulance or go to your nearest Mercy Health or other hospital emergency department.