



Somerset Community Pain
Management Service

**Working together
on my health**

Using Medication to Manage Ongoing Pain

You will probably have taken lots of different pain medications. These can be very effective in certain situations. In acute problems such as immediately after an injury or operation they can be used in high doses to take pain away almost completely. You may well have found, however, that in long-term pain this is rarely the case. This is because ongoing pain is more complex.

The aim of medication in long-term pain is to take the edge off your pain to allow you to do more in your life. You do not need it in the same way as, for example, someone that has diabetes needs insulin. Some people decide that in the long term the problems associated with it outweigh the benefits of taking it. Some of the common concerns that people ask us about are looked at below.

You can record your pain levels on the 'My Pain' tracker in the 'Take Action' section of the patient online platform, available for patients registered with the Pain Service and accessible through the Pain Service website. For patients who are not registered, there is more information available in the 'Get more information/resources' section of the website.

Common concerns about taking pain medication

- **“Pain medication will ‘mask’ my pain”**

We are used to thinking of pain as a warning signal that something is wrong. This is often true in acute pain but rarely so in long-term pain. You may worry that if you reduce the pain by taking medication you may end up doing things that will damage your body in some way. This is not the case. In fact, taking pain medication may help you to be more active which in the long term may reduce pain.

- **“What about the side effects”**

All pain medications have possible side effects. They can sometimes make you feel sick, constipated, sleepy or unsteady on your feet, particularly when you first start taking them. Some may affect your sex drive or ability to have sex (but remember that lots of things can influence this e.g. pain, relationship problems and other health conditions). If these side effects are really affecting your quality of life, rather than helping you get on with what is important, talk to your GP.

- **“I will get addicted to my pain medication”**

This is a common concern. It is important to make the distinction between **addiction** and **dependence**. **Addiction** is the term used to describe physical and psychological craving for a drug and is not common in people taking prescribed medication. **Dependence** means that the body gets used to having a certain medication and that withdrawal effects may be experienced if it is stopped suddenly. This does not happen with all pain medication and to all people. If you have been taking pain medication for some time and want to reduce or discontinue it completely talk to your GP. They can advise you on how to reduce it in a way to minimise the symptoms of withdrawal.

Common concerns about taking pain medication continued...

- **“I should save taking pain medication in case the time comes when I need it more?”**

Taking pain medication may help you to increase your activity and fitness levels. In the long run this may actually reduce the likelihood that you will need it in the future. It may be helpful to think of medication as a way of helping you achieve your goals. Once you have done this you may want to talk to your doctor or pain specialist about reducing it.

- **“If I take pain medication for a long time it will stop being effective”**

It is true that sometimes pain medication, which has been effective to begin with, stops working as well. This is called **“tolerance”** and describes a situation where the pain tends to “break through” even when the dose is increased. Increasing your dose of medication increases the risk of dependence and other side effects. Because of this it is advisable to find a level that suits you and stick to it. The effects of **tolerance** disappear very quickly once you stop taking pain medication.

Getting the most out of pain medication

- ✓ Be realistic about the effect that pain medication can have.
- ✓ Take your medication regularly at pre-set times and not according to the severity of your pain. This will ensure that you have a steady level of drug in your blood stream rather than “peaks and troughs”. This will be more effective at reducing your pain. It also means that you are in charge and not your pain.

Getting the most out of pain medication continued...

- ✓ Do not be tempted to take more than the recommended dose even if you have a flare up of your pain. Use the management strategies which you have learnt in this manual.
- ✓ Use medication as a way of helping you to be more active and improve your quality of life.
- ✓ For more information on long term pain and tablets discuss with your GP.