

A guide for patients being treated for pain with opioid painkillers

How opioids can affect your bowels and what you can do about it

Most of us may need to take simple painkillers, like paracetamol or ibuprofen, from time to time for headaches or other aches and pains. However, for some people pain can be severe because of an illness.

It is important to get the right treatment for pain. This may mean taking strong painkillers called opioids.

Opioids are a type of strong painkiller prescribed by a doctor for severe pain. Like all medicines, opioids can cause side effects.

During your treatment with opioids, you may experience a change in bowel habit. If these changes are similar to the ones described in this leaflet, **this could be opioid induced constipation, sometimes referred to as "OIC"**. If this happens to you, you are not alone — opioids cause constipation in many people who take them long-term for pain.

What is opioid induced constipation (OIC)?

Opioids work by blocking the pain signals in your nerves. Unfortunately, they can also slow down the movement of the gut and cause opioid induced constipation.

OIC has a different cause from constipation caused by stress, lifestyle and/or diet.

How might OIC affect you?

If you are taking opioids and going to the toilet to poo less often than three times a week, you may have OIC.

OIC might be more than just not being able to poo. There are a number of other symptoms that you may have as well.

These include:

- Stomach pain or discomfort
- Passing a lot of wind
- Pain when going to the toilet caused by hard, dry poo making pushing hard
- A feeling that you haven't finished your bowel movement completely even after you have done a poo
- Tiredness
- Feeling sick

How OIC can impact you

OIC may make you feel worried about going out and being too far from the toilet, which can affect your social life and make it difficult to go to work. OIC can also cause further pain and discomfort on top of the pain you are trying to treat.



Spotting and tracking changes in your bowel habit, related symptoms and quality of life

Your bowel habit is a term used to describe:

- How often you go to the toilet to do a poo
- How easy or difficult it is to pass a poo
- What your poo looks like

When you start taking opioids, it may be a good idea for you or someone close to you to monitor your bowel habit, any constipation or related symptoms and how they are making you feel and share any changes with your doctor as soon as you notice them. You can write them down in a diary if it helps you to remember what symptoms you had on each day.

Dealing with OIC — speaking openly to your doctor

Having a list of the topics you want to discuss with your doctor may help you get the most out of your consultation. Below are a few examples of topics that may help you get the conversation started:

- How you are feeling since you started your opioid painkiller
- Side effects of your opioids that you may be experiencing
- What you have been doing to manage any constipation symptoms
- How you are getting on with any constipation medicines or treatments

Remember:

Share any concerns with your doctor as soon as you think you may be experiencing OIC symptoms. They will be happy to help you get the treatment you need.

Managing your pain and OIC in everyday life

If you experience constipation after starting opioids, this can be treated without having to change your pain relief medication — speak to your doctor. Don't suffer in silence — not mentioning your OIC symptoms to your doctor will make them think everything is fine, which may make it harder for you to get the help you need. Your doctor or nurse may first recommend that you try some simple lifestyle changes to help relieve your constipation.

These may include:

- Drinking more fluids, such as water
- Taking more exercise, such as walking

Managing OIC and related symptoms can be a challenge, but you don't need to deal with things on your own — it's never too early or too late to speak to a doctor or other healthcare professional.

If simple lifestyle and diet changes are difficult for you, or have not helped, your doctor may prescribe you something.

What laxatives can do to help

There are a number of different types of laxatives that your doctor can prescribe for you.

These can work by:

- Softening your poo, which helps to make it easier to pass
- Making your poo more slippery, which also helps to make it easier to pass
- Helping your bowels work harder to push your poo out

It is important to take the laxative you have been prescribed as recommended by your doctor. That way it will have the best chance of working. If you are still experiencing OIC and related symptoms after trying laxatives and dietary/lifestyle changes, don't give up — there are other treatments available.

Remember:

- Your doctor doesn't want you to suffer in silence and they speak about bowel habits, and other intimate problems, with people every day
- OIC is unlikely to get better on its own, so you need to speak to your doctor to get the help you need
- You'll feel so much better just talking to your doctor about this, and openly discussing your OIC with your doctor will help them find the right treatment for you

You don't have to put up with OIC and its symptoms — your symptoms can be treated and managed without changing your pain medication, allowing you to focus on what is important to you. It's important to speak to your doctor about OIC symptoms — you don't need to deal with them on your own and it's never too early or too late to speak up.



For more information about opioid induced constipation speak to your doctor, or visit www.talkaboutconstipation.com