

## Pharmacy

# Driving when taking strong painkillers and other sedating medicines

Many medications prescribed or bought over the counter can make you feel drowsy (sleepy).

Medicines affect people in different ways. Some sedating medicines may make you feel very drowsy while others may not affect you at all.

Other people can be taking such medication under the supervision of their GP or hospital medical team and remain quite alert, but a test would show a level of the drug in their system.

## Driving while on medication and the law

The current law says you should not be behind the wheel of a vehicle if you feel sleepy or unable to concentrate due to the influence of any drugs, whether prescribed or not.

An offence of 'driving with excessive levels' of certain drugs is also now in force. This is in addition to current laws about fitness to drive. It applies to strong painkillers and sedatives. The police have powers to carry out roadside testing for these substances.

The following information tells you what you need to think about before driving a vehicle. It also suggests what information you should be prepared to give the police if you should be investigated for the new offence.

**Remember: If you feel sleepy or unable to concentrate you MUST NOT DRIVE.**

## Medicines which might affect your ability to drive

This list is only a guide and individuals vary in their reaction to medication. Examples include:

- painkillers for example: codeine; co-codamol; dihydrocodeine; morphine; tramadol; fentanyl; oxycodone; hydromorphone; methadone; ketamine
- antihistamines, for example, chlorphenamine (Piriton®)
- anti-anxiety medication, for example, diazepam, lorazepam, oxazepam
- sleeping tablets, for example, temazepam, zopiclone
- nerve painkillers, for example: gabapentin; pregabalin; clonazepam; amitriptyline; carbamazepine
- anti-depressants, for example: amitriptyline, dosulepin
- anti-sickness medication' for example: cyclizine, prochlorperazine; haloperidol, levomepromazine.
- antipsychotic medication olanzapine



## Taking your medication

When you start taking one of these medicines you may feel drowsy. In most people this side effect only lasts for a short period of time. When you no longer feel drowsy you should be able to drive again.

If your medication is changed or the dose is increased, you may then feel drowsy. You must wait until this side effect has passed before driving.

Some people may take painkillers as needed for pain relief. If these medications make you feel sleepy, do not drive. If you do experience sleepiness, do not drive for at least 3 hours after taking a strong painkiller and then assess whether you are fit to drive.

Some people only take sedating medications at night time. Often the sedating side effects last into the following day and even into the afternoon. Be sure not to drive during the day if you still feel drowsy.

## Will I be able to drive?

Taking sedating medication does not always mean you cannot drive. However, if you feel less alert or if you are unable to concentrate, have problems with your vision, or you feel physically weak or ill, it would be unwise to drive. Ask your doctor if you are unsure.

If you feel confident to drive, please follow these guidelines:

- **do not** drive in bad conditions or at night time
- **do not** drink any alcohol before driving

## Where do I stand legally?

The law states that **if you are unfit to drive, you must not drive**. This relates to the effects of prescribed medicines, medicines bought over the counter, illegal drugs and alcohol. If you attempt to drive while you are unfit to do so due to the side effects of your medicine, you may face criminal charges and your insurance may be invalid.

Recent changes to the law mean you may be prosecuted if you have certain levels of controlled drugs in your system (even if they haven't affected your ability to drive). The police will be able to conduct a roadside test using saliva to check the level of medication in your system.

If you are found to be driving and have such medicines in your system on testing, there is a recognised medical defence in law provided that there is no concern about your fitness to drive. This would apply provided that:

- you have followed the advice given by your doctor in respect to driving
- you have been using the medication exactly as directed by your doctor
- you have considered whether you are able to drive while taking the medication (as described in this leaflet)

## What do I need to do?

Keep a copy of your current prescription (either a paper copy or on your NHS app) and keep this with you when driving.

Contact the DVLA and tell them about the medication you are taking and your condition. In the majority of cases the DVLA will not need any further information from you or your doctor, and will offer you further helpful advice on driving.

You can contact the medical department of the DVLA on **0300 790 6806**.

If you drive a lorry, coach or bus, you **MUST** contact the DVLA when you are diagnosed with cancer.

It is also a good idea to contact your vehicle insurance company and tell them the medication you are taking. Most insurance companies will accept that if your doctor says you are fit to drive while taking the medication, you will be covered if you are involved in an accident.

**Your doctor or specialist nurse may have told you that you are fit to drive, but it is your responsibility to decide whether you are fit to drive on each occasion.**

If you have any concerns, please talk to your doctor or specialist nurse or pharmacist at The Christie, or your GP and ask them if you are unsure about your medication.

Further information can be found at [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)  
Search 'Drugs and driving: the law'.

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

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For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham, Salford or Macclesfield. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.



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