

Supportive care

Methadone

Methadone is used to treat pain that is difficult to control. The possible benefits of treatment vary; your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist will be happy to answer any questions you have about your treatment.

We may be recommending this medicine to be used for a condition it was not originally designed for; so you may find that there are some differences between the hospital and the manufacturer's information. This additional information will inform you of the reason(s) why you are taking this medicine and to highlight any other information. This should be read in conjunction with the manufacturer's patient information leaflet.

What is methadone?

Methadone is a strong opioid painkiller. It is used when pain is difficult to manage or side effects limit the use of other painkillers. Methadone can be of particular use in the management of neuropathic (nerve) pain. It is available as an oral liquid and tablets, and is very rarely given by injection.

The use of methadone in palliative and supportive care for pain control is completely separate to its use for managing substance misuse.

What dose of methadone is usually prescribed?

The dose of methadone prescribed varies greatly from person to person. Methadone is started in the hospital under the supervision of the palliative/supportive care team in order to work out the correct dose safely. For the first couple of days you will take the methadone as required up to every 3 hours. After 5-7 days this will be converted to a twice daily regular dose that you will continue to take at home. You should take the methadone as directed by the hospital, and measure the dose with the oral syringe or spoon provided by the pharmacy.

Please do not alter your dose or take more frequently than you have been advised to do so.

How long will I have to stay in hospital?

Typically you will need to stay in hospital for 7-10 days, although this is very variable and may be longer. This is to ensure that the methadone is started safely and that it is an effective painkiller for you.

What are the possible risks/side-effects?

Tiredness or sleepiness may occur, however this often settles shortly after starting methadone. Other side-effects may include sickness, constipation and confusion. Methadone has a very long duration of action which varies greatly from person to person. In view of this, particularly when methadone is started, there is a risk of the methadone affecting your breathing and level of alertness. **This is potentially**



very dangerous, even fatal and is the reason why you will be admitted to hospital and monitored closely. **If you start to feel drowsy, unwell or accidentally take an overdose of methadone please seek medical attention urgently.**

Can I take methadone with my other medications?

All of your medications will be reviewed when you are started on methadone and often several medications that you are taking will be reduced or stopped. The methadone replaces any strong opioid painkillers that you are prescribed (e.g. morphine, oxycodone, and fentanyl). Some other painkillers such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), for example ibuprofen, or paracetamol may be continued.

Some medications, such as those used for pain, depression and certain antibiotics can affect the level of methadone in your body. For this reason it is important that people prescribing medications for you are aware that you are prescribed methadone. Similarly, it is important that you consult a healthcare professional before taking any over the counter medications

Use of methadone and sedative medicines such as benzodiazepines or related drugs increases the risk of drowsiness, and difficulties in breathing (respiratory depression). If you are taking any sedative medicines, you will be carefully monitored for side-effects.

You should avoid grapefruit juice whilst you are prescribed this medicine.

If you have any queries or concerns about methadone and other medicines you are taking, you can discuss with your doctor, specialist nurse or pharmacist. Further information is available in the manufacturer's patient information leaflet which is supplied with the medication.

Is methadone addictive?

It is very rare for someone who is taking methadone for pain relief to become addicted. Methadone is sometimes used in the management of people who misuse drugs. This is not the reason that you are being prescribed methadone.

What is the length of treatment and plan for follow-up?

The length of treatment will depend on your symptoms. You will be regularly reviewed to assess whether your methadone dose needs to be altered. Before you are discharged we will agree who will review your pain after discharge; this will be either be The Christie supportive care team or a local service if this is available. You can continue to take methadone for as long as it helps your pain.

You should always let healthcare professionals know that you are taking methadone and not stop taking it suddenly.

Do I need to have any tests when taking methadone?

Methadone can also impact on how your heart passes electrical messages causing it to pump. For this reason you will have an ECG (a tracing of your heart rhythm) before methadone is started, and periodically following this as necessary.

Can I drive if I am taking methadone?

Methadone may impair your mental and/or physical ability to perform potentially hazardous tasks such as driving or operating machinery. It may be an offence to drive if your ability to drive safely is affected by taking this medicine. You should not drive after starting methadone or after a dose change until you have had a discussion with your doctor regarding whether this is advisable and safe.

Can I drink alcohol if I am taking methadone?

You should not drink alcohol whilst taking methadone. This is because the combination may cause more sleepiness. In addition alcohol may also change the way that methadone is processed by your body.

Who will initiate methadone and issue further prescriptions?

This will be agreed between the supportive care team and your GP before you are discharged. The dose of methadone must not be changed by anybody other than a member of the supportive care team, unless it has been agreed that your pain will be managed by a local palliative care or pain service.

If the supportive care team are issuing prescriptions and you are unable to attend The Christie, we will liaise with the local palliative care team to take over prescribing.

If your GP is willing to prescribe methadone, **please don't leave it too late to request a prescription**. You should request a prescription at least 72 hours in advance of you running out of medication to give your GP and community pharmacist time to arrange. Please allow extra time at weekends and bank holidays.

If you are attending The Christie supportive care or pain clinic for follow up, methadone may be dispensed by The Christie Pharmacy. You should be given sufficient supply to last you until your next review.

If you run out of methadone and are unable to get a further supply, you must contact the supportive care team for advice.

How should methadone be stored?

When taken as directed and under medical supervision, methadone is safe for you. However, it is dangerous, potentially fatal, if taken by those it is not prescribed for. Please keep the liquid in the original packaging **out of the reach of children or anyone else who might take it inadvertently**, and if it is consumed, seek urgent medical attention. **Methadone overdose can be fatal**. Any unused medication can be returned to any pharmacy for safe disposal.

Who should I phone if I need advice urgently about methadone?

Monday to Friday, 9:00am - 5:00pm contact the supportive care team on **0161 446 3559, or 0161 446 8493**.

During the evening or at weekends and bank holidays, if you have any queries, contact The Christie Hotline on **0161 446 3658**.

Useful contacts:

- Secretary: supportive care team **0161 446 3559**
- Secretary: pain team **0161 446 8493**
- Supportive care pharmacist **0161 446 3443**
- The Christie Pharmacy **0161 446 3432 / 3433**

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.

The Christie is committed to producing high quality, evidence based information for patients. Our patient information adheres to the principles and quality statements of the Information Standard. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact **the-christie.patient.information@nhs.net**

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.



Contact The Christie Hotline for
urgent support and specialist advice
The Christie Hotline: 0161 446 3658
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week