

# Pain relief after an operation

## Information for Patients

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### What is this leaflet about?

Pain following an operation is normal and to be expected; it has a known cause and will improve as your body heals and recovers from surgery.

If left untreated pain can cause a **number of problems**:

- You might be too sore to move around and spend more time at rest; this can increase the risk of **blood clots** forming in your legs (deep vein thrombosis)
- You might be too sore to take deep breaths and cough; this can increase your risk of developing a **chest infection**
- You might be too sore to sleep or rest properly; this can make you tired, miserable, anxious or stressed.

There are a variety of painkillers available for you to take home following surgery. The type of painkiller prescribed depends on a **number of factors** such as:

- What **operation** you've had
- Other **medications** you take
- Any other **medical conditions** (such as asthma, stomach ulcers, heartburn)
- Any **allergies**.

Your anaesthetist will take these factors into account and discuss with you which painkillers are most suitable for you. It is recommended that, even if you don't feel very sore, you take painkillers **regularly for the first couple of days** following an operation to keep you comfortable and enable you to be active. The length of time you will need to take painkillers will vary from 2-10 days after surgery depending on the type of surgery you have had. To begin with you may require a combination of painkillers. As you begin to feel better, first reduce the number of strong painkillers (tramadol/dihydrocodeine/codeine) that you take each day whilst continuing to take paracetamol and/or anti-inflammatory medicines regularly. As you continue to heal you can take painkillers if and when you need them instead of regularly **but still within the prescribed limit**.

A supply of some or all of the following tablets will be given to you to take home. **The recommended dosages will be clearly written on each medication box.**

### Paracetamol

This is a commonly used and safe painkiller with few side effects. Paracetamol takes up to an hour to work and it is for this reason that **regular use is recommended**. The dose is 2 tablets (1g) every four to six hours, up to a maximum of four times in each 24-hour period. It is very important not to take more than 8 tablets (4g) per day. **When taking paracetamol regularly you must not take other medicines containing paracetamol, for example, co-codamol, co-dydramol and many cold and flu remedies.** If you weigh less than 50kg (approx. 7 stone 12) you should reduce the dose to only 1 tablet (500mg) every four to six hours up to a maximum of 4 tablets (2g) per day.

## Ibuprofen/Diclofenac

These are both anti-inflammatory drugs. They are very effective painkillers and help reduce swelling (inflammation). If prescribed either of these drugs it is very important to **take them with food**. If taken on an empty stomach they can cause **irritation and heartburn**. If this should happen to you, stop taking the drug. You may not be recommended to take these medicines if you have asthma as anti-inflammatory drugs can make **some** people's asthma worse. If you are elderly, hypertensive, or taking certain medications such as blood thinners (anticoagulant medicines) like warfarin and apixaban, anti-inflammatory medicines should be avoided due to the increased risk of bleeding or kidney damage. The usual dose of ibuprofen is 1 tablet (400mg) every 8 hours. The dose of diclofenac is 1 tablet (50mg) every eight hours.

**Simple painkillers can be bought from your pharmacy or a local supermarket. Often they cost less than 50 pence for a packet of 16. Your NHS has to pay more than 4 times this to supply you with the same drug. If you are able, you can help us to look after more people by buying your own paracetamol and/or ibuprofen. Please let your anaesthetist know if you have your own supply of these medications.**

## Codeine/Dihydrocodeine

These are stronger painkillers for **moderate to severe** pain. It is **safe to take them with paracetamol and anti-inflammatory medicines** because they work in different ways. Taking these medicines **combined with regular paracetamol makes them more effective**. The dose for both codeine and dihydrocodeine is the same, 1(30mg) or 2(60mg) tablets every four hours, up to a maximum of 8 tablets (240mg) in each 24-hour period. These drugs can make some people feel sick and/or dizzy. Should this happen to you try taking a smaller dose or taking it less frequently.

## Co-codamol

You may be prescribed co-codamol. This is a **combination drug** containing paracetamol and codeine. The dose for this is 2 tablets every 4-6 hours up to a maximum of 8 in 24 hours. **When taking the full daily dose of co-codamol regularly you must not take other medicines containing paracetamol.**

As your pain gets less you can exchange one co-codamol tablet for one (500mg) paracetamol tablet. This means you will get the full daily dose of paracetamol (maximum dose of paracetamol is 4g in 24 hours if weight greater than 50kg and 2g in 24 hours if weight less than 50kg) but half the dose of codeine. After this, as pain reduces even more, you can cut down to paracetamol alone.

## Tramadol

This is a strong painkiller for **moderate to severe** pain. It is **safe to take with paracetamol** and the anti-inflammatory medicines because they work in different ways but should **not be taken with codeine/dihydrocodeine** because they work in a similar way. The dose is 1(50mg) or 2 capsules (100mg) every four hours, up to a maximum of 8 capsules (400mg) in a 24 hour period. This drug can make some people feel sick and/or dizzy. Should this happen to you try taking a smaller dose or taking it less frequently.

## Morphine

This is a **strong painkiller used to treat severe pain** and may be required after certain surgeries. It should be used in combination with paracetamol and/or ibuprofen/diclofenac as it works in a different way from them. It should only be required for a short period of time after surgery. It comes in tablet or liquid form. After surgery you are likely to be prescribed the fast acting form of morphine. This takes 30-60 minutes to work fully and will last for 4-6 hours. Morphine can make you feel sick and tired, itchy, confused and dizzy. It will also cause constipation. Should this happen to you try taking a smaller dose or taking it less frequently.

If you do get constipation you may require laxatives which may be given to you on discharge from the hospital or which you can buy from your local pharmacy.

## After I am discharged from hospital who can I ask about my pain and painkillers?

If you have any concerns or questions in the days immediately after your operation you can call the **Day Surgical Unit for advice on 0131 242 3291**. Alternatively your local pharmacist can advise you about dosages and side effects of all these medications. If you feel you need painkillers after 10-14 days following your surgery or your pain is not improving at all then you should make an appointment with your GP who can assess your pain and perform any necessary examinations.

Detailed information about all these medications can also be found online at [www.nhs.uk/medicines](http://www.nhs.uk/medicines)