



# FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

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## How to Use Methadone Safely



**U.S. Department of Health & Human Services**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
Food and Drug Administration

## **Methadone**

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Methadone provides relief for patients who do not respond to non-narcotic pain medicines and has also been used for decades to treat individuals who suffer from addiction and dependence on heroin and narcotic pain medicines.

When taken as prescribed, methadone is safe and effective. But all medicines have risks. Patients and healthcare providers need to understand the power and physical effects of methadone in order to get the maximum benefits.

### **A Proven Road to Relief— If You Keep Your Eyes on the Road**

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Whether known by Dolophine, Methadose or its generic name, methadone has provided relief to millions of patients. Methadone works by changing how the brain and nervous system respond to pain. It is also used in drug detoxification and treatment programs to lessen the symptoms of withdrawal and to block the effects of opiate drugs. Methadone allows individuals to recover from their addiction and to reclaim active and meaningful lives.

Patients being treated for pain generally receive a prescription from their doctor and take the medication at home. Patients taking methadone for addiction receive their doses at accredited programs under supervision. After a period of stability, these patients are given methadone to take at home between program visits. In all cases, if not taken correctly, methadone can be dangerous.

## The Dangers of Overdose

Pain relief from a dose of methadone lasts about four to eight hours. But there are big differences in how each patient reacts to methadone. Even after the pain relief effects wear off, methadone remains in the body for much longer. Taking more methadone to relieve the pain can cause unintentional overdose.

### Navigate the Risks: Two Simple Steps

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#### 1. Take Methadone *exactly* as prescribed.

To be safe, people must take only the dose prescribed, at the times prescribed. Methadone can build up in the body to a toxic level if taken too often, if the dose is too high, or if it is taken with certain other medicines or supplements.

#### 2. Know—and share— your complete health history.

People who take methadone need to give health professionals every detail of what they are taking. This is especially important for a first-time user of methadone. A long list of medications can interact with methadone:

- Methadone may be more hazardous when used with alcohol, other opioids (opium-like substances) or illicit drugs that depress the central nervous system.

- Be especially careful about other medicines that may make you sleepy, such as other pain medicines, anti-depressant medicines, sleeping pills, anxiety medicines, antihistamines, or tranquilizers.
- Other medicines to watch out for include diuretics, antibiotics, heart or blood pressure medication, HIV medicines and MAO inhibitors.
- If you are taking medicine that may cause disruptions in your heartbeat (known as arrhythmias), you should be especially cautious taking methadone.
- Even if a medication is not on this list, it could still be dangerous.

Older adults and people with debilitating conditions may be more sensitive to methadone's effects. To avoid danger, people should tell health professionals about any illnesses or conditions. Here are just a few that doctors must know about:

- A history of drug or alcohol addiction
- Pregnancy and nursing (current or planned)
- Seizure disorders, such as epilepsy
- Cardiac conditions such as low blood pressure or long QT syndrome (racing heart)
- Breathing disorders such as asthma, sleep apnea or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

- Mental illness
- A history of head injury or brain tumors
- Other conditions, including liver or kidney disease, underactive thyroid, curvature of the spine, gallbladder disease, adrenal gland disorders such as Addison's disease, prostate enlargement and urination problems

## **Using Methadone: Steer Clear of Danger**

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### **What Can Patients Do to Stay Safe?**

- Methadone can be addictive. Patients should take care not to abuse it.
- Never use more methadone than the amount prescribed.
- If you miss a dose or if you feel it is not working, do not take extra. For pain management patients, take only the recommended dose at the recommended time. For patients in methadone maintenance treatment for addiction, contact your clinic for instructions.
- *No one* should use methadone if it has not been prescribed for them.
- Be especially careful if taking methadone for the first time.

## **When Taking Methadone:**

- Do not consume alcohol or medicines that contain alcohol.
- Be careful when driving, operating heavy machinery or doing anything that requires you to be alert. Methadone, like many other medications, can slow thinking and reaction time and make you drowsy.
- Store methadone at room temperature and away from light.
- Always take methadone in the exact dosage amount and form you have been prescribed.
- Take steps to prevent children from accidentally taking methadone.
- Never give methadone to anyone else even if the person has similar symptoms or suffers from the same condition as you because it can be dangerous.
- Dispose of unused methadone by flushing it down the toilet.

Suddenly stopping or going off methadone treatment can be dangerous. Patients should talk to their doctors first. To minimize withdrawal symptoms, health professionals can work out a plan to gradually reduce the medication.

## Take Side Effects Seriously

Some side effects are emergencies. Patients should stop taking methadone—and contact a physician or emergency services right away—if they:

- Have difficulty breathing or shallow breathing
- Feel light-headed or faint
- Get hives or a rash; have swelling of the face, lips, tongue or throat
- Feel chest pain
- Have a fast or pounding heartbeat
- Have hallucinations or confusion

Make sure your family members and members of your household know what symptoms to look for, especially signs of shallow breathing or loud snoring.

Other side effects are not life-threatening, but can still be cause for concern. Patients should immediately talk to health professionals if they have: severe or persistent nausea, vomiting, constipation, loss of appetite, weight gain, stomach pain, sweating, mood changes, vision problems, flush or red skin, sleep difficulties, decreased sexual desire or ability or missed menstrual periods.



## **Feel Lost? Here's Help**

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Patients who develop a problem with methadone or have questions should speak with a physician or contact 1-800-662-HELP.

Helpful information also can be found at the following Web sites:



**U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services (HHS)**  
[www.hhs.gov](http://www.hhs.gov)

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration (SAMHSA)**  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

**Center for Substance Abuse  
Treatment (CSAT)**  
[www.csat.samhsa.gov](http://www.csat.samhsa.gov)

**CSAT's Division  
of Pharmacologic Therapies**  
[www.dpt.samhsa.gov/methadonesafety](http://www.dpt.samhsa.gov/methadonesafety)

**Food and Drug Administration (FDA)**  
[www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)