

## Opioid Medications

Opioid medications are prescribed for strong or severe pain. Morphine is the most commonly known opioid. Other opioids include buprenorphine, codeine, oxycodone, fentanyl, tramadol, tapentadol, hydromorphone and methadone. Opioids vary in strength and how quickly and for how long they work for (e.g. short or long acting). They also come in different forms like tablets, patches or liquids. Usually a short-acting opioid is used first, at low dose. Higher doses or different forms can be prescribed if pain worsens. Opioids are usually prescribed when other pain medications and treatments are not sufficient for managing pain.

### Myths about Opioid Medications

Some people are uncomfortable using opioid medicines because they have heard bad things about them. Often these stories are not true.

You may have heard that **opioids hasten death. This is FALSE.**

**MYTH!**

Opioids do not shorten a resident's length of life. When used properly, they can be effective in relieving pain and increasing quality of life.

You may have heard that **opioids have side effects. This is true, but they are often MANAGEABLE.**

**MYTH!**

Opioids can have side effects, but not always, and this can be managed. Common side effects include:

- Constipation, which can be helped through diet, fluid, laxatives and exercise.
- Nausea and vomiting, which is temporary and can be helped with anti-nausea medication.
- Drowsiness, dizziness or confusion, which is usually temporary.

You may have heard that **opioids are addictive. This is FALSE for residents in aged care.**

**MYTH!**

When prescribed and used under the guidance of a doctor, addiction is not usually an issue. Tolerance to the drug may develop, meaning that an increased dose is needed. This is normal and can be managed.

You may have heard that **pain management should only start once pain is unbearable. This is FALSE.**

**MYTH!**

Sometimes people believe that medications like opioids should only be taken at a point where pain is at its worst. Pain is more easily managed when treatment occurs at the early signs of pain. It is often important to take prescribed medications before pain is expected to occur, under the guidance of a doctor or nurse.