



Dealing with Pain

***M*ethadone was** invented over 55 years ago as an opioid medication to treat pain. So it is sometimes believed that people regularly taking the drug as part of a methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) program to treat addiction don't feel physical pain like everyone else. This is false.

But when it comes to treating pain, you may have some special needs. This brochure explains some of those.

Why doesn't methadone in MMT block pain?

An adequate maintenance dose of methadone every day takes away cravings for opioid drugs and allows you to live a better life. But your body becomes accustomed to the pain-relieving quality of methadone. This is called *tolerance* to the drug.

It means that you will feel pain just like someone who has never taken methadone. And you will need painkilling drugs, possibly including opioid medications when appropriate.

What if pain goes untreated?

Besides the obvious physical discomfort caused by pain, there can be some serious health consequences. Healing may be delayed. Increased stress may disturb appetite and sleep. You may have feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and depression.

Such distressing symptoms might lead to a relapse to street drugs. So it is wise to have your pain properly treated rather than suffer in silence.

How is pain treated when you are taking methadone?

There are many different painkilling medicines, called *analgesics*. The World Health Organization has recommended several levels of treatment, depending on the type of pain.

For average pain that doesn't last very long, such as from a headache or muscle strain, over-the-counter analgesics might be recommended. These include aspirin, other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, or Tylenol®. Ask your doctor for advice and directions for their use.

If pain is more severe and/or long-lasting, opioid analgesics with actions similar to morphine may need to be prescribed. But, since your body is already used to an opioid drug (methadone), talk to your doctor about the various analgesics available for your treatment.

Additional medicines may be prescribed to help increase the effects of analgesics. These medicines, such as antidepressants or anti-seizure drugs, are also used for other purposes.

Are there any painkillers to avoid?

Certain painkillers fight against methadone and can cause uncomfortable withdrawal symptoms. Known as opioid *partial agonist* or *mixed agonist/antagonist* drugs — like Buprenex®, Nubain®, Stadol®, Talacen®, Talwin® — they should be avoided. Also, Darvon® and Demerol® are not recommended because harmfully high doses could be needed for pain relief in a methadone-maintained person.

Can you stay on methadone?

While you are being treated for pain, there is no need, nor would it be helpful, to stop or change — increase or decrease — your methadone maintenance dose. If you are treated by outside professionals, such as at a hospital, you can ask your clinic's staff to help make sure you are continued on methadone as usual.

Persons taking adequate maintenance doses of methadone *do not* feel increased drug cravings or get “high” when given opioid analgesics for pain. However, to avoid dependence on painkillers, it is important to stop taking the medicines according to your doctor's directions once the pain is better.

What should you do?

Here are some suggestions for helping your health care providers help you deal with pain:

- **Be honest. Tell all your doctors, dentists, nurses, and other medical professionals treating you that you are on methadone maintenance and of your past drug history, so they can prescribe the best and safest medication.**
- **Encourage them to talk to your MMT clinic doctor and staff, with your permission.**
- **Ask for the name of the pain medication and for assurances that it will mix safely with methadone.**
- **Understand that, for your own good, you may be given only enough pain medication for a day at a time.**
- **Follow directions exactly, taking too much of any painkiller can be harmful.**
- **Let your health care providers know how the medication is working, so they can change the dose or the medication if necessary.**

Be cautious about advice offered by other people; what works for one person may not work for you or even be harmful. And keep in mind that taking *any* other drugs with pain medicines, especially street drugs or alcohol, can be dangerous, possibly leading to death.

Whenever you have questions or concerns, talk to your clinic staff.

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For further information on addiction and recovery issues, visit the *Addiction Treatment Forum* website at www.atforum.com.

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