



Methadone & Mental Functioning

*M*ethadone Maintenance Treatment (MMT) has a long history as an effective and safe therapy for opioid addiction. Yet, since methadone is a strong medication, some persons have been concerned that it might affect mental functioning and the ability to perform everyday tasks.

This brochure explains how individuals stabilized in MMT can be just as mentally alert and intellectually capable as any other persons.

What are the concerns?

Since the earliest days of MMT, there have been concerns that methadone might affect a person's ability to think clearly and perform daily tasks, such as working or driving a vehicle. Much of this concern came from a stigma surrounding methadone and a prejudice that former drug-addicts taking opioid medication every day could not function normally.

However, it has been demonstrated during more than 35 years of MMT that persons taking adequate daily doses of methadone and actively participating in therapy can enjoy many benefits. They can live active lives, hold responsible jobs, succeed in school, care for families, have satisfying sexual activity and normal children, and be just as healthy as drug-free persons.

Methadone-maintenance has been among the most thoroughly studied treatments in all of medicine. Part of that research has focused on how methadone might affect intelligence and various mental skills required for daily activities. The results of more than two dozen studies, many dating back to the 1970s, have been consistently positive.

Does methadone affect intelligence?

Taking into account education level, a number of studies showed that persons in MMT have IQs within a normal range. Surprisingly, one study found that the intelligence of some very long-term participants in MMT, as measured by their IQs, actually increased to some extent.

Other tests of intelligence found similar results – methadone had no negative effects. At the same time, tests of memory in MMT participants found that methadone had no influence one way or the other.

What about job skills?

Several studies examined capabilities that demonstrate the employability of persons taking daily methadone. In tests of ability to mentally focus and complete repetitive tasks, MMT participants scored equal to or better than other persons in the general population, including college students. In most cases, methadone-maintained individuals who were already employed did better than their non-working peers.

Various other performance tasks were used to measure balance, depth perception, coordination, and reaction time. These tests, combined with measures of intelligence and mental alertness, found that MMT participants can function very well in any job capacity for which they are qualified or trained.

Is driving safe while on methadone?

Driving motor vehicles by individuals using drugs or alcohol is an area of great public concern. Therefore, persons maintained on methadone have been involved in a number of studies examining important skills required for safe driving, such as paying close attention, reaction time, eye-hand coordination, and accurate responses to emergencies. MMT participants had completely normal functioning, and, in some cases, their reaction times were even better than comparison group members not taking methadone.

To examine “real world” driving performance, some researchers looked at reported traffic violations and accidents among methadone-maintained persons. MMT participants did not differ in any way from other drivers of the same age and the researchers concluded that methadone itself should not be a source of concern when it comes to driving motor vehicles.

Does dose matter?

It is important to note that the research involved persons receiving what were considered *adequate* daily doses of methadone. There was no benefit in terms of

mental functioning to lowering daily doses, and higher doses were not detrimental if required by the individual for stabilization in MMT.

The many studies to date express considerable confidence in the fact that methadone, used as a medication in MMT, does not hinder a person’s ability to function in any mental or intellectual capacity.

What to watch for?

Although methadone itself does not have harmful effects on mental function, there are a number of symptoms that might warn of problems requiring medical attention or methadone dose adjustment. Here are some things to watch for:

- Feeling unusually sleepy, groggy, or fatigued;
- Often feeling mentally weary or confused;
- Problems focusing your attention;
- Unusual trouble remembering things;
- Vision problems;
- Difficulty performing simple physical tasks;
- Sudden loss of coordination or balance.

Bring these concerns to the attention of your MMT clinic staff. Along with this, it is important to tell them of any changes in your life, new medications you have started taking, or other drug use.

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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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