



Using Methadone Safely

***M*ethadone** is an effective and safe medication when used properly. However, it is a very powerful drug. So, whether you have been on methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) for just a few weeks or many years, there are certain safety precautions to always keep in mind.

This brochure provides some important reminders for using methadone safely and what to do if an emergency occurs.

Why is methadone safety so important?

Each year, there are a number of medical emergencies associated with methadone that could easily be prevented. Almost all cases also involve other drugs or alcohol, but some are due to ingestion of methadone alone.

Most safety concerns involve take-home methadone, which allows you to store and consume the medication unsupervised. However, it also requires you to assume responsibility for your own proper use of this drug and for preventing its misuse by others.

What is opioid overmedication?

Methadone takes longer to act and lasts longer than other opioids – such as, heroin, Demerol®, OxyContin®, or Vicodin® – and improper use can result in opioid overmedication. This may happen when methadone is taken in too large a quantity or combined with other drugs or alcohol that increase its effects.

Overmedication symptoms include: feeling “high,” drugged, or unsteady; drowsiness or “nodding-off”; slowed or difficult breathing; a slow heart-beat; blue lips or fingernails; mental confusion; or,

pinpoint pupils. In extreme situations – overdose – breathing and heartbeat may stop, and the person suffocates.

Even mild overmedication symptoms can be very serious. If you, or someone you know, experience any of those symptoms, MMT clinic staff or emergency services should be contacted.

How can unintended use be prevented?

Methadone should always be kept in its original, labeled, containers and stored in a safe place. A locked, sturdy cabinet is best, or a locked metal box if stored in the refrigerator.

Some accidents have involved children, thinking liquid methadone mixtures were fruit drinks or tablets were candy. Adults have pilfered easily accessible methadone as a “party drug,” usually mixing it with alcohol or other substances. Even a small amount of methadone in a child or adult unused to it can have tragic consequences.

What about sharing methadone with another person?

Never share your methadone with anyone. Chances are, they will mix the methadone with pain pills, other drugs, or alcohol. This would be extremely harmful due to a slow and unexpected build up of excessive opioid effects, possibly leading to overdose.

Also, sharing with another person in an MMT program can be unsafe. The extra methadone could cause uncomfortable side effects or make them ill.

Is it ever okay to take extra methadone?

There may be times, even after many months or years, when you feel that your dose is not “holding” and a bit more methadone would help. This may be associated with stress, or physical illness, or taking new medications that cause methadone’s effects to feel weaker.

This should be discussed with MMT staff, rather than taking more methadone or using other drugs

on your own to boost methadone’s effects, which could be unsafe. The clinic staff will need to know of every drug you are taking, whether by prescription or otherwise, and of any changes in your life or health. Extra methadone may provide temporary relief, but it might not be the longer-term solution that you need.

What can you do?

If methadone is misused, it can take time for harmful opioid effects to build up. So, what may not immediately seem like an urgent situation can quickly turn into one. Here are some action steps to follow:

- **If a person develops symptoms of opioid over medication it is an emergency requiring immediate medical attention.**
- **Remain calm, call for help, and stay with the person.**
- **Inform emergency personnel of *all* drugs and alcohol that were taken.**
- **Keep the person awake and never allow them to just “sleep it off.”**
- **However, do not give the person coffee, alcohol, or stimulant drugs; they will not help and could be harmful.**
- **If the person vomits, make certain they do not inhale it and choke.**
- **If breathing and heartbeat stop, give CPR (rescue breathing) until help arrives.**

Quick and proper action can help save a life. It is always better to be safe by seeking help early, rather than being sorry later.

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