

iii) Avoiding Overdose in the First Two Weeks of Methadone Treatment: A Guide for Patients and Their Families

Methadone is a very safe drug, but accidental overdoses sometimes happen, particularly in the first two weeks of treatment. The questions and answers below will help you get through this period safely. Share this information sheet with a friend or family member.

Why can't my doctor increase my dose more quickly?

When you first start methadone, you want to get on the right dose as soon as possible. But your doctor has to increase your dose slowly over several weeks, because your body takes time to adjust to methadone, and (unlike other narcotics), methadone builds up slowly in your bloodstream over several days. A dose that may feel like too little on a Monday could put you in hospital by Thursday.

What can I take to relieve withdrawal and help me sleep until the methadone begins to work?

Substances that make you relaxed or sleepy can be dangerous. This includes alcohol, opioids, benzodiazepines (Ativan, Valium, Rivotril, etc.), antihistamines such as Gravol or Benadryl, and certain types of antidepressants and tranquilizers.

Even certain antibiotics can be dangerous, by blocking the breakdown of methadone in the body. So make sure to check all your medications with your methadone physician

Isn't methadone supposed to make you sleepy?

No. You are supposed to feel normal on methadone, not high or sleepy. Methadone builds up so slowly that someone can feel sleepy during the day, lie down for a nap and not wake up.

How do I know if my methadone dose is too high?

- You may feel sleepy, and nod off several times during the day;
- You may be forgetful;
- You may be difficult to wake up from your sleep;
- You may experience slurred speech, stumbling walk, or appear drunk.

If these things occur you must call your doctor immediately or go to Emergency.

What precautions can I take to prevent overdose?

- Only take your methadone in the morning.
- See your doctor twice a week for the first two weeks.
- Don't take benzodiazepines, alcohol or other sedating drugs
- Discuss your methadone treatment with a close friend or family member. If they see that you're drowsy, they must call your methadone doctor or an ambulance.

I've been offered a small amount of methadone by a methadone patient at the pharmacy. This can't hurt — I know I need 80 mg and I'm only at 45 mg.

Above all, don't take any extra methadone. It's probably safe for your friend, but could be lethal for you. You took 80 mg **once** and were okay. If you had taken 80 mg every day for three or four days, you might have died. Remember, it takes five days for a certain dose to build up in your blood.

I'm receiving take-home doses. Is it safe to give a small amount of methadone occasionally to a friend who's not on methadone treatment, when he goes into withdrawal?

No it isn't safe, because your friend is not tolerant to methadone. A dose that is just right for you could be fatal for your friend.