

Heroin dependence - methadone treatment

Methadone treatment is a way to deal with some of the problems that you may experience from your use of heroin (or other opiates, such as morphine, pethidine or codeine). Methadone is not a cure for heroin addiction. Going on methadone takes the pressure off maintaining a habit. It will give you time to think, to work, to sort things out without worrying about where your next hit is coming from.

Subutex (buprenorphine) is another medical drug used to treat heroin dependence.

Methadone is a substitute for heroin

Methadone can act as a substitute for heroin because they are both opiate drugs. It's different because:

- You drink it in cordial or fruit juice
- Its effects last longer (about 24 hours)
- The peak effects are felt four to eight hours after you take your dose.

Methadone stops you from hanging out

Methadone will help you to stop hanging out for heroin. Methadone:

- Stabilises you so that you can lead a normal, healthier life
- Costs you much less than a heroin habit
- Reduces the risk of HIV and hepatitis B and C
- Allows you to withdraw from heroin with less discomfort.

How to start methadone treatment

Methadone treatment is offered through a GP or a specialist methadone service. To be part of a program you need:

- A doctor who holds a government permit to prescribe methadone for you. The doctor will apply for the permit.
- Regular check-ups with the local doctor who is managing your drug issues - they will check your dose and may examine your urine for methadone and other drugs.
- To visit your local chemist or dispenser for your daily dose (you pay a dispensing fee when you pick up your methadone).
- Visits to a drug counsellor - this may be optional in some programs.
- It may take a few weeks before you feel comfortable and your right dose is worked out and you.

Mixing methadone with other drugs can be dangerous.

A number of people have died after mixing methadone with other drugs. You should avoid:

- Alcohol
- Heroin and other opiates
- Sedatives, tranquillisers and sleeping pills
- All prescribed pain killers containing dextropropoxyphene
- Dilantin (epilepsy medication).

You are still addicted while on methadone

Methadone is as addictive as heroin. To withdraw from methadone, you should:

- Slowly reduce your methadone dose over several months or longer
- See your doctor regularly
- Stop reducing the dose or slow down the rate of reduction if you feel you can't cope.
- It is better for the baby if women stay on methadone throughout their pregnancy.

Side effects of methadone

Side effects of methadone treatment include:

- Withdrawal symptoms, if your dose is too low
- Lowered blood pressure, dizziness and shallow breathing, if your dose is too low
- Lowered sex drive
- Tooth decay - as with heroin and other opioids, methadone dries up the saliva in the mouth, resulting in tooth decay. This can be minimised with good oral hygiene
- Menstrual changes
- Sweating, nausea and vomiting
- Skin rashes and itching.
- Methadone may not suit everyone. Some people do better with residential programs or detoxification.

It will take a few weeks before your right dose of methadone is worked out for you. It may also take several weeks before you are comfortable on methadone.

Methadone is also a pain killer

Methadone is not only used to treat heroin addiction. Specialist pain physicians sometimes prescribe methadone to treat certain chronic pain conditions.

Where to get help

- Direct Line (Tel. 1800 888 236) can refer you to an approved methadone prescribing doctor, who may be a GP or other doctor. They can also help you find a pharmacy that is approved to give methadone.
- Family Drug Help – for information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs Tel. 1300 660 068

Things to remember

- Methadone is a substitute for heroin - it can help stop heroin cravings and take the pressure off maintaining a habit.
- Methadone has side effects that can include nausea and vomiting, sweating, tooth decay, skin rashes and itching.
- Some medications should not be mixed with methadone these include sedatives, tranquillisers and alcohol.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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