

Methadone and buprenorphine

Methadone and buprenorphine can be prescribed by a doctor as a substitute for heroin or other opioids (drugs related to opium). They can help overcome an addiction to opioids and a drug-dependent lifestyle.

Methadone

Methadone is a synthetic (man-made) opioid that is given as a regular dose to reduce the need for heroin and other opioids. It lessens the cravings and withdrawal symptoms ('hanging out') in people withdrawing from heroin and other opioids.

Methadone is taken as a once a day oral dose of solution or syrup.

Buprenorphine

Buprenorphine is derived (comes from) from morphine. It has a milder opioid effect than morphine or methadone. It is given as a regular dose to reduce the need for heroin and other opioids. It lessens the cravings and withdrawal symptoms in people withdrawing from heroin, methadone and other opioids. It is an alternative to methadone.

Buprenorphine is usually taken in a single oral dose once every one to three days. It is taken as a tablet or thin film placed under the tongue

(sublingual). The tablet is crushed to reduce its dissolving time and to reduce potential for misuse.

For treatment of opioid addiction, buprenorphine is available alone in tablet form (*Subutex*) or combined with naloxone as a tablet or thin film (*Suboxone*).

Benefits of methadone and buprenorphine

The correct dose will:

- be of guaranteed quality
- help you to stop using heroin
- last longer in the body than heroin
- stop you 'hanging out' for heroin
- make drug withdrawal more comfortable
- avoid health problems and risks related to injecting drugs.

Unwanted effects

It takes several days for methadone or buprenorphine to reach full effect. You may be uncomfortable during the first days or weeks of treatment, while the dose is being adjusted.

During this time, it is very important not to use any other drugs or alcohol, as this increases the risk of overdose.

Some discomfort may be side effects of the methadone or buprenorphine. For example:

- drowsiness
- sweating
- aches and pains
- dry mouth
- nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite.

If the methadone or buprenorphine dose is too high or too low, unwanted effects are more likely. It is important to visit your doctor regularly to get the dose right.

Treatment programs

Only approved doctors can admit someone to a methadone or buprenorphine program and prescribe these medicines. The Alcohol and Drug Service or the 'user group' in your state or territory can help you to make contact with an approved doctor or clinic.

These medicines are more helpful if they are part of a treatment program including a supportive network, counselling and lifestyle changes. Regular contact with a specialist counsellor can help you through difficult issues. It is important to find a counsellor who is right for you.

There are two types of programs:

- **Maintenance** – allows you to stay on methadone or buprenorphine long term. This legal, supervised medicine use is safer than illegal drug use. It helps improve your well being and your control of your life. You can plan with your doctor to reduce the methadone or buprenorphine dose slowly when you are ready.
- **Withdrawal** – aims to help you get completely off drugs quickly and usually lasts 5–14 days.

Methadone/buprenorphine maintenance programs

- All states in Australia have maintenance programs but the rules and regulations vary from state to state.
- Methadone clinics and approved pharmacies can dispense methadone and buprenorphine. They must follow the doctor's prescribed dosing plan.
- A client usually starts treatment at a clinic and may transfer to a local pharmacy when stable.
- The clinic nurse or pharmacist must watch each client take their dose.
- Clinic transfers or 'takeaway' doses can usually be arranged if needed (e.g. for work or travel). Always allow plenty of time for this to be arranged.
- Do not store takeaway doses in the fridge, and keep them away from children.

Self care

- Do not use other drugs (e.g. heroin, benzos, alcohol) while you are on methadone or buprenorphine, as this increases the risk of overdose.
- Some medicines for epilepsy and other illnesses can interact with methadone and buprenorphine. Ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- If you want to stop using methadone or buprenorphine, discuss it with your doctor or counsellor first.
- Do not give your dose or takeaways to anyone else.
- Do not inject methadone or buprenorphine.
- Tell any doctor or dentist treating you that you are on opioid maintenance treatment.
- Clean and check your teeth regularly, as opioids can increase tooth decay. Visit a dentist regularly.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week.
- Get plenty of sleep and relaxation. Learn some relaxation techniques.
- Eat regular, healthy meals including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

If you are pregnant, planning to become pregnant or are breastfeeding, discuss treatment options with your doctor. All states have specialist antenatal and postnatal services.

For more information

Ambulance service Emergency

Phone: triple zero (000)

Alcohol and Drug Information Services (ADIS)

NSW	02 9361 8000 (Sydney) 1800 422 599 (NSW Country)
QLD	1800 177 833
WA	08 9442 5000 (Perth) 1800 198 024 (WA country)
NT	08 89228399 (Darwin) 08 8951 7580 (Central Australia) 1800 131 350 (Territory wide)
SA	1300 131 340
TAS	1800 811 994
VIC	1800 888 236
ACT	02 6207 9977

Australian Drug Foundation Drug Info

Website: www.druginfo.adf.org.au

Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL)

Handy Hints Information Handbook

Phone: 02 6279 1600

Website: www.aivl.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.org.au

NPS MedicineWise Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.***

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Your Self Care Pharmacy:

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia is committed to providing current and reliable health information.

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