



## BC METHADONE PROGRAM

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## Methadone Facts for Patients

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

### **Why can't my physician increase my dose more quickly?**

When you first start methadone, you want to get on the right dose as soon as possible. However, your physician 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?**

Only take medications that are prescribed by your methadone physician. If you're on a medication prescribed by another physician, your methadone physician needs to approve it because it could interact with methadone.

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

Even certain antibiotics can be dangerous and may block the breakdown of methadone in the body. So make sure to check all medications with your methadone physician.

### **Is methadone supposed to make you sleepy?**

No. You are supposed to feel normal on methadone, not high or sleepy. If you feel so sleepy that you need to take a nap, ask someone to check on you frequently. This is in case your methadone levels have risen to dangerous levels while you've been sleeping. Please take the following precautions:

- only take your methadone in the morning
- see your physician at least weekly until you are on a stable dose
- avoid driving vehicles or operating heavy machinery for the first few weeks of your methadone treatment until your dose is stabilized
- discuss your methadone treatment with close friends and family members—if they see that you're drowsy, they must call your methadone physician or an ambulance

### **What are some of the symptoms that my methadone dose is too high?**

- You may feel sleepy and nod off several times during the day, or you may be difficult to wake up.
- You may be forgetful.
- You may experience breathing difficulties.
- You may have slurred speech or a stumbling walk, or appear drunk.
- Your skin may be cool, clammy or blue.

If these symptoms are occurring, you must call your physician immediately or go to the hospital emergency department as you may be overdosing.

### **What are the long-term effects of methadone?**

You should be aware that methadone maintenance is a long-term treatment which may last from a year to 20 years or more. With the proper dose, this prolonged treatment is medically safe and is the most effective treatment currently available for opioid dependence.

There are no serious side effects from methadone use. Minor symptoms such as sweating, constipation, nausea, changes in sex drive and itching usually lessen over time and with dosage adjustments. These should not be confused with withdrawal symptoms or other medical conditions. Women taking methadone may experience changes in their menstrual cycles and should ensure that they are taking birth control.

### **How should I store my methadone doses?**

Keep your methadone in its original container, tightly closed and preferably in a locked box, out of reach of children. It can be stored either in the refrigerator or at room temperature, away from light, excess heat and moisture (not in the bathroom or the kitchen). It is important to ensure that your methadone cannot be taken by others, either accidentally or on purpose, as your dose could cause serious harm or death even to another methadone patient. Keep track of how much solution is left, so you will know if any is missing.

Do not keep any medication that is outdated or no longer needed. Return any leftover methadone to your pharmacy or talk to your pharmacist about the proper disposal of your medication.

### **I've been offered a small amount of methadone by another methadone patient at the pharmacy. Is it okay to take it?**

Above all, don't take any extra methadone. It could be lethal for you. Even if you've taken extra methadone in the past without any problems, the next time you take some, you might die. Remember, it takes five days for a methadone dose to build up in your blood.

Parts of this document adapted with permission from the *Methadone Maintenance Guidelines*, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (2005).