

Using and looking after controlled medicines safely

Information for the public

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Information for people using and looking after controlled medicines

NICE has written advice about using and looking after controlled medicines (sometimes called controlled drugs) safely. The advice is for health professionals (such as doctors, dentists, midwives and pharmacists) and organisations (such as hospitals and pharmacies) but there is important information that anyone taking controlled medicines should know about. This is because controlled medicines need to be used and looked after more carefully than other medicines.

What is a controlled medicine?

Strict legal controls are needed for certain medicines. This is because they may cause serious problems like dependence ('addiction') and harm if they are not used properly. Sometimes people use these medicines illegally for reasons that are not medical (drug misuse), and so extra safety measures are needed to make sure they are prescribed, supplied, used and stored safely and legally. Controlled medicines include some strong

painkillers, such as morphine, and some tranquillisers and stimulants. Medicines that help with addiction, such as methadone, are also controlled.

When might I need a controlled medicine?

Controlled medicines are prescribed only when other medicines (that are not controlled) cannot help with a medical problem.

You might be offered a controlled medicine in hospital, such as a strong painkiller after an operation or if you are having a baby and need pain relief during labour.

Your GP might prescribe you a controlled medicine to help with problems such as anxiety, sleep problems or long-term pain.

A health professional working in a specialist service might prescribe you a controlled medicine to help if you have a drug addiction.

How will I know how to take my controlled medicine?

If you will be taking your medicine yourself, you should be given clear advice and information about how to take it. If a family member or carer will be giving you the medicine they also need to be given this information.

The information you are given for controlled medicines should cover:

- What the medicine is being used for.
- When to take it, how often and the dose.
- How you take it (such as how to use medicine patches or whether to take your medicine with food or on its own).
- How and when to take different types of the medicine (for example, a fast acting one and a slower acting one) if you need both types.
- How long you may need to take it for.
- How long it will take to work.

- Whether you need to take any extra care while taking this medicine, for example if it could affect your ability to drive or do your job safely.

You must not let anyone else take your medicine. Your healthcare professional should explain this clearly.

If a healthcare professional is giving you your controlled medicine, for example if you are in hospital, they should tell you what the medicine is and what it is for. They should also explain if you need different types of the medicine, such as one that works faster than the other. They should write all the information about your medicines in your notes.

What happens when I pick up my prescription for a controlled medicine?

It is very important that controlled medicines are collected by the right person. The pharmacist will ask if the medicine is for you, or if you are collecting it for someone else. You may be asked for identification, like a drivers licence or passport. If you have asked a family member or carer to pick up your medicine for you, they may need identification too.

If you have different types of your medicines, such as a fast acting one and a slower acting one, your pharmacist should check you understand the difference and know how and when to use them.

Usually, you shouldn't be prescribed more than 30 days' worth of medicine at one time. If the pharmacist can't give you all the medicine you have been prescribed you should pick up the rest within 28 days of the date on the prescription.

How do I know the controlled medicine is working?

As with all medicines, your doctor will want to check how well the controlled medicine is working and whether you're having any problems with it. Your dose might need to change while you find what works best for you or after you have been taking it for a while. You and your doctor should agree how often you need your medicine reviewed.

Where should I keep my controlled medicine?

You should be given advice and information about how to store your controlled medicine

safely.

You should never let anyone else take your medicine and you should always keep it well away from children.

If you are worried about keeping your medicines safe you can talk to your doctor or pharmacist about whether to use a storage box that locks.

What do I do with controlled medicines I don't need or used medicine?

It is important that controlled medicines are disposed of safely. You, and your family or carer (if appropriate), should be given advice about what to do with left over medicines or used medicines (such as used patches and opened bottles of liquid). You should be asked to return your unused medicines to your pharmacist so they can be destroyed safely. Talk to your pharmacist if you have questions about what to do with left over or used medicines.

What goes in my health records?

If you've been given any medicine, all the information about it should be put in your health records.

Your GP should be told if you have been given a controlled medicine by someone else, for example if you have been in hospital or if an urgent care doctor has come out to your home. This information should also be included in your health records. It is very important for your own safety that your GP is told that you have had a controlled drug. If you feel very strongly that you don't want this to happen, talk to the healthcare professional who prescribed the controlled medicine. Any information that is shared by your health professionals should be treated confidentially and respectfully.

More information

Taking some controlled medicines might make you drowsy. This can be dangerous if you drive or operate machinery. It is an offence to drive if you are taking some controlled drugs over certain doses, see the government's information about [drugs and driving: the law](#).

Further advice and support for people taking controlled medicines for pain is available from [Pain Concern UK](#), 0300 123 0789.

There is also more information about controlled medicines at [NHS Choices](#).

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