

Understanding NICE guidance

Information for people who use NHS services

Methadone and buprenorphine for managing opioid dependence

NICE 'technology appraisal guidance' advises on when and how drugs and other treatments should be used in the NHS.

This leaflet is about when **methadone** and **buprenorphine** should be used to treat people who are dependent on opioid drugs (such as heroin and morphine) in the NHS in England and Wales. It explains guidance (advice) from NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence). It is written for people who are opioid dependent but it may also be useful for their families or carers or anyone with an interest in the condition.

It does not describe opioid dependence or the treatments in detail – a member of your healthcare team should discuss these with you. Some sources of further information and support are on the back page.



These may not be the only possible treatments for people who are dependent on opioids. Your healthcare team should talk to you about whether they are suitable for you and about other treatment options available.

What has NICE said?

Methadone and buprenorphine (given as a tablet or a liquid) are recommended as treatment options for people who are opioid dependent.

A decision about which is the better treatment should be made on an individual basis, in consultation with the person, taking into account the possible benefits and risks of each treatment for that particular person. If both drugs are likely to have the same benefits and risks, methadone should be given as the first choice.

Different people will need different doses of methadone or buprenorphine. People should take methadone or buprenorphine daily in the presence of their doctor, nurse or community pharmacist for at least the first 3 months of treatment and until they are able to continue their treatment correctly without supervision.

Treatment with methadone or buprenorphine should be given as part of a support programme to help the person manage their opioid dependence.

Opioid dependence

Substances such as heroin, opium and morphine are known as 'opioids'. Many opioids are 'psychoactive', which means they affect the way the brain works. They can change a person's mood or behaviour, so that they feel pleasure, a sense of wellbeing or calmness. But opioid dependence is associated with a wide range of social and health problems, including a high risk of infection and mental health problems. There is also a danger that a person could take a fatal overdose. Some people become dependent on opioids; this means that they feel they need to take opioids, and have withdrawal symptoms if they stop.

Methadone and buprenorphine

Methadone and buprenorphine work in a similar way to the illegal opioids such as heroin, but their effects are not as strong. Buprenorphine also works by blocking the effects of opioids, so that people don't get the same result from taking them.

If a person stops using illegal opioids, taking methadone or buprenorphine can reduce or prevent the unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. Some people stay on methadone or buprenorphine long term (this is known as 'maintenance therapy'). Other people gradually lower their dose and stop taking methadone and buprenorphine altogether (this is known as 'abstinence').

What does this mean for me?

When NICE recommends a treatment, the NHS must ensure it is available to those people it could help, normally within 3 months of the guidance being issued. So, if you are dependent on opioids, and your doctor thinks that methadone or buprenorphine is the right treatment for you, you should be able to have the treatment on the NHS. Your healthcare professional should prescribe methadone unless they decide, after talking to you, that buprenorphine is more suitable for you.

You will be given methadone or buprenorphine under supervision for at least the first 3 months of treatment, and you should also be enrolled in a support programme.

Please see www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance if you appear to be eligible for the treatment but it is not available.

More information about opioid dependence

The organisations below can provide more information and support for people who are dependent on opioids. Please note that NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

- Addaction, 020 7251 5860
www.addaction.org.uk
- Adfam, 020 7553 7640
www.adfam.org.uk
- The Alliance, 0845 122 8608
www.m-alliance.org.uk/home.htm
- Release, 0845 4500 215 or 020 7729 9904
www.release.org.uk
- Turning Point, 020 7702 2300
www.turning-point.co.uk

NHS Direct online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) may be a good starting point for finding out more. Your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) may also be able to give you further advice and support.

About NICE

NICE produces advice (guidance) for the NHS about preventing, diagnosing and treating different medical conditions. The guidance is written by independent experts including healthcare professionals and people representing patients and carers. They consider all the research on the disease or treatment, talk to people affected by it, and consider the costs involved. Staff working in the NHS are expected to follow this guidance.

To find out more about NICE, its work and how it reaches decisions, see www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance

This leaflet and other versions of the guidance aimed at healthcare professionals are available at www.nice.org.uk/ITA114

You can order printed copies of this leaflet from the NHS Response Line (phone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference N1175).