

## **Understanding NICE guidance**

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Information for people who use NHS services

# **Naltrexone 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 **naltrexone** 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.



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

## What has NICE said?

Naltrexone is recommended as a treatment option for people who have been opioid dependent but who have stopped using opioids, and who are highly motivated to stay free from the drugs in an abstinence programme.

It should only be given to people who have been told about the problems associated with treatment, and with proper supervision. Treatment with naltrexone should be given as part of a support programme to help the person manage their opioid dependence.

Healthcare professionals should regularly review how well naltrexone is working to help people stay off opioids. If there is evidence that the person has been using the drugs again then healthcare professionals should consider stopping naltrexone treatment.

## 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.

## Naltrexone

Naltrexone is a drug used to help people stay off opioids altogether ('abstinence'). It is given after they have stopped taking opioids for at least 7–10 days. It works by blocking the effects of the opioids, so that people don't get the same result from taking them.

### 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, have not taken them for 7–10 days, and your doctor thinks that naltrexone is the right treatment for you, you should be able to have the treatment on the NHS. Your healthcare professional should explain any possible problems with having the treatment, and you should be enrolled in a support programme.

If you are prescribed naltrexone and you continue to take opioids, your healthcare professional may stop your treatment.

Please see [www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance](http://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](http://www.addaction.org.uk)
- Adfam, 020 7553 7640  
[www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)
- The Alliance, 0845 122 8608  
[www.m-alliance.org.uk/home.htm](http://www.m-alliance.org.uk/home.htm)
- Release, 0845 4500 215 or 020 7729 9904  
[www.release.org.uk](http://www.release.org.uk)
- Turning Point, 020 7702 2300  
[www.turning-point.co.uk](http://www.turning-point.co.uk)

NHS Direct online ([www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://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](http://www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance)*

*This leaflet and other versions of the guidance aimed at healthcare professionals are available at [www.nice.org.uk/ITA115](http://www.nice.org.uk/ITA115)*

*You can order printed copies of this leaflet from the NHS Response Line (phone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference N1177).*