

Painkilling patches

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What are painkilling patches?

When non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen or celecoxib) or paracetamol do not manage your arthritis pain, your doctor may prescribe you a painkilling patch. These patches usually contain opioid drugs.

What are gel patches and matrix patches?

Gel patches and matrix patches are different types of painkilling patches. A gel patch has a reservoir of the drug in the middle of the patch. This type of patch has an uneven release pattern so is less popular.

Matrix patches have the drug evenly spread through the whole patch, which helps with the release pattern. The amount of drug in a matrix patch depends on its size.

REAL LIFE STORY

‘ I have osteoarthritis most severely in my hips. I had tried both co-codamol and tramadol but after a couple of months the breakthrough pain was as bad as ever. I started on the lowest dose (5mg) buprenorphine patches. This was increased to 25mg.

The first patch took about three days before I felt any effect and each new patch takes about a day to work fully. The effect is more constant because it does not wear off. I am getting closer now to being pain-free. I have co-codamol to take as a top-up on bad days when there is some breakthrough pain.

The patches adhere to the skin extremely well. I can't say that it is all trouble-free, as I experience (at times) quite intense itching with the patches, but on the whole I am coping better. ’

How long do painkilling patches last for?

Painkilling patches for chronic arthritis pain are designed to last for between 12 hours and 7 days. They provide steady background pain relief. If your pain spikes while you are wearing a patch, you can take a pain-relieving drug but because there may be a risk of drug interaction, you should discuss the options with a doctor.

How much of the drug is absorbed?

Absorption rates depend on your body chemistry. For most people the larger the patch the more drug is released into the body. The patch is designed to release the drug into the blood slowly. It is important to note that not all the drug in the patch will be absorbed and processed by the body.

Can I cut the patch in half to halve the dosage that I am taking?

It is important that you do not cut the patch in any way to lessen the dosage of the drug that you are receiving as this is an imprecise way of changing dosage. If you

feel that your dosage is either too low or too high, speak to your doctor who can change your prescription.

Can I also use a hot water bottle over the area of pain?

It is important to remember that excessive heat will increase the absorption of the drug from the patches, so sources of heat (such as a hot water bottle) should not be placed near the patch.

Where do I apply the patch?

The patch can be put in one of several places on the body and does not have to be over the area of pain. The medication is absorbed into the bloodstream from the patch and circulates around the body to reach all parts. The absorption of the drug depends on the thickness of the skin. The areas of skin that you will be advised to place the patch will be:

- around the shoulder
- around the chest area
- below the collar bone
- below the armpits.

Try to vary the position of patches around the recommended areas. Continued use in the same area of skin may cause a rash.

Are there any tips for applying a painkilling patch?

Make sure the patch is applied to dry and clean skin – oil and sweat can cause the patch to fall off. Also, do not put the patch on an area with hair.

Can I shower with my painkilling patch on?

You can shower with your patch on, but you must be careful about washing the area of your body where the patch is.

What are the side effects of painkilling patches?

All side effects are dosage related. Common side effects are:

- nausea
- vomiting
- drowsiness
- dry mouth
- contraction of the pupil in the eye

- blood pressure lowering upon sudden standing
- difficulty in passing urine easily
- constipation.

Also, any opioid medication carries a risk of dependency. Speak to your doctor about this if you are concerned. Some studies have found that there are fewer side effects with an opioid patch than other opioid medications. However, if you are worried about the side effects you experience, seek advice from your GP or pharmacist.

Why is constipation a side effect of opioids?

All opioids have constipation as a side effect, the severity of which is related to the dosage. However, remember that constipation can also be caused by a lack of mobility, dehydration and an unhealthy diet.

The body produces endorphins, its natural 'feel-good' hormones. Endorphins attach themselves to receptors in the gut to slow down digestion and decrease the rate at which the gut empties. Opioids bind to the same receptors in the gut as endorphins. It is routine to have a laxative prescribed alongside any opioid medication. Speak to your GP if you are worried about side effects. 'Fruit cubes' are useful to buy from health food shops as they contain fruit juice and a vegetable laxative.

Who cannot use painkilling patches?

If you have the following conditions, you should be cautious when taking any kind of opioid medication:

- hypotension – low blood pressure
- asthma or other respiratory disease
- alcoholism
- hepatic impairment – liver disease
- kidney problems
- if you are breastfeeding.

Please speak to your doctor if you are unsure of your suitability for use of an painkilling patch.

Can I drink alcohol with a painkilling patch?

It is best to avoid drinking alcohol whilst wearing a painkilling patch as this can lead to extreme drowsiness and low blood pressure.

What painkilling patches are there on the market?

Two of the most commonly prescribed patches in the UK are buprenorphine (BuTrans, Transtec) and fentanyl (Durogesic DTrans).

Where can I get more information and support?

Arthritis Care is the UK's largest charity working with and for all people who have arthritis.

We are here to help you make positive choices through our information, website, self-management training, and professional helpline. Call the free helpline for confidential support on 0808 800 4050 (10am-4pm weekdays) or email: Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk

You can find support from others with arthritis by joining our online discussion forums.

We rely on donations to fund our vital work in supporting people living with arthritis. If you would like to make a contribution, please phone us on 020 7380 6540 or you can donate online.

www.arthritiscare.org.uk

Our factsheets are reviewed every 18 months. Please check our website for up to date information and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.

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Contact us

For confidential information and support about treatments, available care and adapting your life, contact the Arthritis Care Helpline

Freephone: 0808 800 4050

10am-4pm (weekdays)

Email: Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk

For information about Arthritis Care and the services we offer, contact us at: **www.arthritiscare.org.uk**

You can also talk to other people who are living with arthritis, through the discussion forums on our website.

Arthritis Care UK office and England regional services:

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