

# Opioid patches



ARTHRITIS CARE

*Empowering  
people with arthritis.*

## What are opioid patches?

When NSAIDS (e.g. ibuprofen) and Cox-2s (e.g. celecoxib) or paracetamol do not manage your arthritis pain, your doctor may prescribe you an opioid drug. Opioid drugs are derived from morphine and designed to relieve chronic pain. Opioids can be administered via an injection, a tablet or a transdermal patch – also known as an opioid patch.

## What are gel patches and matrix patches?

Gel patches and matrix patches are different types of opioid patches. A gel patch has a reservoir of opioid in the middle of the patch. This type of patch has fallen out of favour as it has an uneven release pattern and is being phased out.

Matrix patches have the opioid 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 opioid patches last for?

Opioid patches for chronic arthritis pain are designed to last for three to seven days, to 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 opioid is released into the body. The patch is designed to release the opioid into the blood slowly. It is important to note that not all the opioid in the patch will be absorbed and processed by the body.

## Can I cut the patch in half to halve the dosage of opioid I am taking?

It is important that you do not cut the patch in any way to lessen the dosage of opioid you are receiving as this is an imprecise way of changing dosage. If you feel that your opioid 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 opioid from the patches, so sources of heat (such as a hot water bottle) should not be placed near the patch. Remember that the quicker the drug is absorbed into the body, the faster the side effects will be felt.

## 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 an opioid patch?

Make sure the patch is applied to 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 opioid 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 opioid patches?

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

- nausea
- vomiting
- drowsiness
- dry mouth
- miosis (contraction of the pupil)
- orthostatic hypotension (blood pressure lowers upon sudden standing)
- urinary retention – 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 opioid 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
- if you are breastfeeding.

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

**Can I have alcohol with an opioid patch?**

You can drink alcohol in moderation while wearing the patch, but always be cautious. The combination can be dangerous.

**How many makes of patches are there on the market?**

In the UK there are currently three patches on the market.

Generic Name	Brand Name
Buprenorphine	BuTrans, Transtec
Lidocaine	Lidoderm
Fentanyl	Duragesic DTrans

Currently, fentanyl and lidocaine are used for chronic pain – with lidocaine being used more for postoperative pain. All these patches are only available on prescription.

*Created: September 2008*

**Note**

This information sheet may be photocopied and distributed freely on the condition that it is reproduced in its entirety and that it is not quoted without acknowledgement.

## Arthritis Care

Arthritis Care is the UK's largest voluntary organisation working with and for all people with arthritis.

Our publications are just one of the many services Arthritis Care provides. These include a confidential helpline, self-management and awareness training, information for people with arthritis and health professionals, and local activity and support. We also campaign locally and nationally to help change attitudes and laws and to ensure people with arthritis have access to the treatments and services they need and deserve.

You can also contact other people with arthritis through the discussion forums on our website.

## Contact us

For confidential information and support, contact the Arthritis Care Helpline

**Freephone: 0808 800 4050**

10am-4pm (weekdays)

Email: [Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk)

For information about Arthritis Care and the services we offer, contact us at: [www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)

### Arthritis Care UK office and England regional services:

Tel: 020 7380 6500

**Central England email:** [CentralEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:CentralEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

**North England email:** [NorthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:NorthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

**South England email:** [SouthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:SouthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

### Arthritis Care in Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9078 2940

Email: [NIreland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:NIreland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

### Arthritis Care in Scotland

Tel: 0141 954 7776

Email: [Scotland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Scotland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

### Arthritis Care in Wales

Tel: 01239 711883

Email: [Wales@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Wales@arthritiscare.org.uk)



ARTHRTIS CARE

*Empowering  
people with arthritis.*