

# Methadone

## What is methadone?

**Methadone is a prescription drug that is used to treat opioid dependence. It is one of the most common forms of opioid substitution therapy (OST).**

Methadone is taken as a prescribed daily oral medicine as part of treatment for dependence, removing the need for heroin and other opioids.

By providing a regular, stable opioid dose, methadone removes the need for additional opioids and helps to stabilise opioid-dependent individuals. Methadone can also facilitate changes in the routines and habits that may be associated with the use of heroin or other opioids. This can help a person achieve their treatment goals, which may be to become abstinent, or reduce their opioid use.

Methadone is widely used to treat opioid dependence for the following reasons:

- It is highly effective when taken orally, making it more convenient to use.
- It prevents or reduces opioid withdrawal symptoms and reduces use of additional opioids (illicit or pharmaceutical).
- It is longer lasting than other opioids, such as morphine and heroin, with a single dose usually effective for 24 hours or longer.
- Health problems are reduced or avoided, especially those related to injecting, such as HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C viruses, skin infections and vein problems.

Those participating in a methadone treatment program are generally provided with a daily dose of the drug in an oral solution or syrup, which is swallowed.

The methadone is prescribed by a doctor as part of a treatment plan, with dose and treatment duration based on the characteristics of the individual. Methadone is also used in the treatment of chronic non-cancer pain and cancer pain.

According to the 2013 [National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#), less than one per cent of Australians used methadone, buprenorphine or other opioids for non-medical purposes in the previous 12 months.

The survey also revealed that in 2013 67 per cent of Australians supported methadone/buprenorphine maintenance programs to reduce problems associated with injecting drugs.

## What are the effects?

**People in methadone treatment are less likely to use other opioids (pharmaceutical or illicit), or to become involved in the criminal activities can be associated with illicit drug use.**

**The most common side effects of methadone are:**

- Sedation
- Sweating
- Constipation
- Lowered sex drive
- Aching muscles and joints
- Itchy skin



**Less common side effects include:**

- Light-headedness or dizziness
- Narrowing of the pupils of the eyes
- Impaired night vision
- Shallow breathing

Other effects like suppression of appetite, stomach pain, nausea and vomiting can occur and can usually be reduced by adjusting the dose.

## What are the risks?

As with all opioids, methadone has been associated with non-medical use and fatal overdoses. Methadone (like other opioids) will depress respiration, particularly in higher doses or in people who are not tolerant to opioids. This risk is increased when methadone is combined with other sedatives, like sleeping pills or alcohol.

However, when taken as prescribed in regular doses as part of a treatment program, methadone generally has few long-term effects on health.

Opioids are known to affect sex hormones. Methadone can lead to delayed ejaculation in men and some women have reported a reduced libido. Disrupted menstrual cycles have also been reported, while other women have found their cycles return to normal after experiencing irregularities on heroin and other opiates.

Some potential dental decay may occur due to the reduction in the amount of saliva produced.

Withdrawal from long-term use of methadone may produce some symptoms similar to those experienced through heroin withdrawal. Symptoms tend to be milder than for heroin, but may occur over a longer time period.