



Getting Started on Methadone

Congratulations on your decision to enter methadone maintenance treatment (MMT). For more than 35 years, methadone has helped millions of persons with opioid addiction get their lives back together.

However, methadone is a powerful medication, and there are specific safety measures for getting starting on it. This brochure explains what those are and what to expect. Also, share it with your “significant others” so they can help.

What's different about methadone?

As with other opioids – like heroin, Demerol®, OxyContin®, or Vicodin® – too much methadone can be harmful. However, unlike those other drugs, methadone’s action starts slow, taking several hours to reach full effect, and it stays in the body much longer.

To be safe, the MMT clinic staff will start with a low dose of methadone and gradually increase the daily amount over time. During the course of 5 days to a week or more, methadone accumulates in your system until a higher steady-state level is reached. This build-up occurs even if the dose is kept the same during that time.

How is a starting dose determined?

To decide on a starting dose, medical staff take into account:

- your physical health;
- prescribed medications or other products (e.g., herbal remedies) you may be taking;
- your use of opioids (quantity, frequency, routes of administration), and other drugs or alcohol.

It is extremely important that you provide clinic staff with honest, complete, and accurate information. Otherwise, the wrong dose of methadone might be prescribed and, as with many medications, either too much or too little can be a problem.

What if the dose is too low?

The ideal methadone dose will: 1) relieve withdrawal symptoms, 2) without making you feel drugged or “high,” and, 3) take away the hunger or craving for opioid drugs. However, this usually is not achieved right away.

During the first few days or longer, as the methadone level gradually builds up, you may feel some withdrawal symptoms – especially, 8 to 12 hours or more after taking methadone. These include: yawning, nervousness or irritability, muscle or joint aches, trouble sleeping, nausea, cramping or diarrhea, or drug craving.

These symptoms are uncomfortable, but generally temporary and not dangerous. It is important to tell clinic staff of this discomfort, because it might be appropriate for your methadone dose to be slightly increased. Usually, more time is needed, rather than more methadone.

What about methadone overmedication?

Of much greater concern, and potential harm, is too much methadone. Symptoms of overmedication include: feeling “high,” drugged, or unsteady; drowsiness or “nodding-off”; slowed or difficult breathing; a slow heartbeat; mental confusion; or, pinpoint pupils. In contrast, an unusual boost in energy and ability to stay awake long hours also may indicate overmedication.

These can be very serious. If you experience any of those symptoms at any time, you should never just ignore them or try to “sleep them off.” The MMT clinic staff should be notified immediately.

Also, be aware that mixing other drugs or alcohol with methadone can cause poisonous effects (toxicity). Such mixed-drug toxicity has led to accidental deaths.

Is there a “best” methadone dose?

The size of your starting methadone dose may or may not be related to the frequency, type, or amount of opioids you were using. Your methadone dose will be increased over time, but each individual is different in how much they need and how rapidly their dose is increased to that level.

What can you do?

Methadone is an effective and safe medication when properly used, with a long history of success. You can do your part by . . .

- never taking any new medication or health product without first checking with clinic staff;
- avoiding all illicit drugs and alcohol;
- honestly telling clinic staff how you are feeling each day when you go for dosing.

Special note to “significant others”:

- Watch for any symptoms of methadone over-medication in your loved one and make certain that the MMT clinic staff is notified.
- Due to accumulation, mild methadone over-medication today may lead to more serious toxicity during the next few days.
- Call for immediate emergency assistance if your loved one has trouble breathing, cannot stay awake, or cannot get up.
- Tell responding personnel that the person has recently started on methadone, and of any other drugs that might have been taken.

At any time, bring your questions and concerns to the attention of MMT clinic staff. They are there to help make starting on methadone as safe and comfortable as possible.

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For further information on addiction and recovery issues, visit the *Addiction Treatment Forum* website at www.atforum.com.

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