



The Dangers of Substance Abuse During MMT

Methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) has helped millions of persons overcome opioid addiction. However, continued substance abuse during MMT – whether it involves alcohol or other drugs – is a serious barrier to treatment success.

Mixing methadone and alcohol or other drugs can be unsafe, can make it difficult to achieve an adequate methadone dose, and can defeat the addiction-recovery process. This brochure explains why and what to do about it.

Why is substance abuse harmful during MMT?

Methadone is a very powerful opioid medication, so it can be hazardous when combined with addictive substances, such as: alcohol, heroin and other opioids, sedatives, and many others. This is because the effects are often additive; that is, the mixture is much more potent than the individual drugs by themselves and can result in accidental drug overdose.

At the least, most substances of abuse interfere with the digestion of methadone, called *metabolism*. A normal dose of methadone may become greatly too little or too much, resulting in either methadone opioid-withdrawal or over-medication.

When this happens, the effects are undesirable and, possibly, painfully uncomfortable or even poisonous.

How does alcohol affect methadone?

Alcohol and methadone simply do not mix. In fact, alcohol taken with any substance of abuse is a leading cause of drug-related deaths.

Even a modest amount of alcohol combined with methadone can slow methadone metabolism and make the drinker dangerously intoxicated. The person may pass out and choke to death on his/her own vomit.

Conversely, if alcohol is abused on a regular, chronic basis, besides having its own harmful effects on the body, this can increase methadone metabolism and reduce the amount of methadone in the body. Usually, the person cannot be prescribed added methadone due to the potential for drug overdose.

What other drugs are hazardous?

Mixing illicit opioids, like heroin, with methadone is always risky due to combined drug effects. However, prescription opioid pain medications – such as, OxyContin® or Vicodin® – also can make for a “lethal overdose cocktail” when taken with methadone.

Sedatives/tranquilizers (“downers”) or stimulants (“speed,” cocaine) can interact with methadone metabolism in unpredictable ways. Sedatives combined with methadone may lead to accidental overdose that can obstruct breathing and cause death. Stimulants plus methadone can stress the heart, speeding it up then rapidly slowing it down, or cause severe blood pressure changes, potentially provoking heart failure. Cocaine, even by itself, is particularly harmful to the heart.

Are some substances, like marijuana, less harmful?

Two things are clear about marijuana and so-called “club drugs” like ecstasy, PCP, and others: 1) their recreational use is illegal, and 2) they alter mental functioning. Furthermore, these drugs can have unexpected, potentially harmful, effects in combination with methadone.

One must question why a person in a recovery program for their addiction problems would go near those substances. Certainly, that individual has not accepted essential lifestyle changes, including the avoidance of illegal activities and mind-altering substances.

How does substance abuse complicate MMT?

A person who continues substance abuse while in MMT is his/her own worst enemy. For safety's sake, clinic staff may temporarily need to prescribe less than adequate methadone doses and limit or eliminate take-home dose privileges.

In many cases, it could be dangerous and medically improper to administer methadone at all to an individual who is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Methadone dosing may need to be delayed, resulting in uncomfortable opioid withdrawal symptoms. Taking unauthorized drugs to overcome the withdrawal only further complicates the treatment process, and defeats addiction recovery.

Finally, continued substance abuse increases the risks of exposure to infections, like HIV, hepatitis, TB, and others. For persons already infected, ongoing drug abuse hinders effective medical treatment.

What can you do?

Methadone itself is primarily a medication for treating opioid addiction, while a comprehensive MMT program also can help you overcome all substance abuse. Here are some points to keep in mind:

- **Talk openly and honestly to clinic staff about the substances of abuse that are troublesome for you, and ask how they can help.**
- **Become willing to accept their advice and follow their directions.**
- **Participate fully in counseling and other clinic activities for achieving a sober and productive lifestyle.**
- **12-step programs – AA, NA, CA, MA (Methadone Anonymous), or others – also can be helpful. All groups are not the same; search for ones that you like.**

The road to addiction recovery can be a difficult, life-long journey. However, your MMT clinic staff are there to help you, if you ask them.

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It is not intended as medical advice for individual problems, and appropriate MMT clinic staff should be consulted regarding personal health and addiction recovery questions.

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

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