



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Health**

WA Cancer and Palliative Care Network

# Palliative Care Medicine and Symptom Guide



## Acknowledgements

The WA Cancer and Palliative Care Network would like to thank the Advisory Committee members for their expertise and commitment to the Community Medications Project:

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For more information or resources about the Community Medications project or other projects by the WA Cancer and Palliative Care Network go to: [www.healthnetworks.health.wa.gov.au/cancer](http://www.healthnetworks.health.wa.gov.au/cancer)

This project has been funded by the Department of Health and Ageing, as part of the Palliative Care for People Living at Home Initiative, and developed by the WA Cancer and Palliative Care Network.

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## Your medicine and symptom guide

Your palliative care medicine and symptom guide has been developed for people with palliative care needs and their carers.

### This book talks about:

- General information about medicines
- The role of the pharmacist
- Medicines used in palliative care treatment
- Symptoms and side effects you may experience.

For further advice or information contact your pharmacist or doctor.



## General medicines information

- Store all medicines in a cool, dry, clean place.
- Store medicines safely away from children, visitors and pets.
- Take the right medicine at the right time. Contact your pharmacist for simple charts or other aids to help you. If you do miss a dose contact your pharmacist for advice.
- Check with your pharmacist, nurse or doctor if you are not sure how you should be taking your medicines.
- If you have any side effects from your medicine contact your pharmacist, nurse or doctor for advice.
- The pharmacist may not keep some of your medicines stocked all the time. To ensure a constant supply, organise your next prescription a couple of days before you run out.
- When you are no longer taking any of your medicines, return them to your pharmacist for safe disposal.



## General information about the pharmacist

- Pharmacists work in pharmacies, chemists and hospitals.
- Pharmacists are very knowledgeable about medicines.
- Pharmacists can give advice and information on all types of medicines.
- Pharmacists can provide assistance to help you take your medicines properly such as:
  1. Recommending dose administration aids to assist you in taking your medicines at the right time.
  2. Providing written information about your medicines.
  3. Making a personalised medicine list to give you more information about your medicine use.
  4. Doing a Home Medication Review. A specially trained Pharmacist can come to your home to discuss your medicines with you, and work with your doctor to tailor the medicines to your needs.

If you have any questions or would like more information about your medicines, have a chat to your local pharmacist.

***“Pharmacists have an important role in the community healthcare team. They work together with doctors, nurses and other health professionals.”***

A young woman with curly brown hair, wearing a white lab coat, stands with her arms crossed in a library. She is smiling warmly at the camera. The background consists of wooden bookshelves filled with books, slightly out of focus. A dark red horizontal bar is at the top of the page, and a grey horizontal bar is at the bottom.

# Symptoms

# Constipation

## Causes of constipation

There are many different causes of constipation (e.g. not drinking or eating enough fibre, medicines, lack of exercise or your type of illness).

## Treating constipation

To help treat your constipation it is important you tell your pharmacist, nurse or doctor:

- What your normal pattern of bowel movements is (e.g. daily, every second day)?
- How long it has been since your last bowel motion?
- Do you have any other symptoms (e.g. stomach cramping, vomiting)?
- What medicines you have tried for constipation and how often you took them?

You may find it useful to keep a diary so you can remember this information.



## **How to take constipation medicines**

- There are many different medicines (laxatives) used to treat constipation (e.g. tablets, powders, suppositories, enemas).
- If you have ongoing reasons for constipation (e.g. lack of appetite or are taking medicines that cause constipation) it is best to take the laxative regularly every day.
- If you are taking morphine (or other strong pain medicines) you will usually need to take laxatives every day.

## **How you can help manage constipation**

You can help your constipation by:

- drinking lots of water or other fluids
- eating foods with fibre (e.g. fruits, vegetables and cereals)
- regular exercise.

# Nausea and vomiting

## Causes of nausea and vomiting

There are many different causes of nausea and vomiting (e.g. constipation, chemotherapy, medicines, infections or your type of illness).

## Treating nausea and vomiting

The different types of nausea and vomiting need to be treated with different medicines.

To help treat your nausea and/or vomiting it is important you tell your pharmacist, nurse or doctor:

- How often you feel nauseated?
- How often you vomit?
- When does it happen?  
(e.g. after moving, after a meal, or no particular time).
- Do you have any other symptoms (e.g. dizziness, headache)?
- What medicines have you tried for nausea and/or vomiting and how often did you take them?

You may find it useful to keep a diary so you can remember this information.

## How to take nausea and vomiting medicines

- If you have ongoing nausea and/or vomiting it is best to have the medicine in your body all the time. The medicines will need to be taken regularly to work properly (i.e. 3 or 4 times a day).
- If you are vomiting a lot then the tablets may not be in your body long enough to work properly. See your doctor for advice. You may need to take the medicine by infusion (like a 'drip' but going into the skin).
- Top up or "breakthrough" doses can also help when you have extra nausea and/or vomiting.

## How you can help manage nausea/vomiting

You can help your nausea/vomiting by:

- eating small amounts of food regularly throughout the day
- relaxation or meditation
- treating constipation.

# Pain

## Types of pain

There are many different types of pain (e.g. arthritis, headache, bone, nerve).

## Treating your pain

Not all people will have pain. Pain can be well controlled in most people.

To help treat your pain it is important you tell your pharmacist, nurse or doctor:

- Where the pain is?
- How bad is the pain?
- What it feels like (e.g. does it ache, burn, tingle)?
- What helps with the pain (e.g. sitting, hot packs, medicines)?
- What makes the pain worse (e.g. moving)?

You may find it useful to keep a diary so you can remember this information.



## How to take pain medicines

- Pain medicines may need to be adjusted a few times before the best pain relief can be achieved.
- It is common to need more than one medicine to manage pain.
- Usually you will need to take one medicine to manage the constant “background” pain and another medicine to take when the pain gets worse called “breakthrough” pain.
- If your pain gets worse with some activities (e.g. having a shower) it may help to take your extra pain medicine 30 minutes before the activity. Discuss this with your pharmacist, nurse or doctor.

## How you can help manage pain

Medicines are not the only way to manage pain. Talk with your pharmacist, nurse or doctor about complementary therapies such as:

- hot packs
- massage
- relaxation or meditation.

# Shortness of breath

## Causes of shortness of breath

There are many different causes of shortness of breath (e.g. asthma, emphysema, chest infections, lung cancer, muscle weakness, anxiety).

## Treating shortness of breath

Being short of breath can often make you feel anxious.

To help treat your shortness of breath it is important you tell your pharmacist, nurse or doctor:

- How often you feel short of breath?
- Does anything brings on the feeling or make it better?
- What other symptoms do you have (e.g. cough, wheeze, feel anxious)?

You may find it useful to keep a diary so you can remember this information.

## How to take shortness of breath medicines

- The best medicine for decreasing the sensation of breathlessness is morphine. Usually only small doses are needed and these may be taken just when the shortness of breath comes on or may be taken regularly to ease ongoing breathlessness.
- If the feeling of breathlessness is making you anxious then a relaxant medicine may be added (e.g. lorazepam).

## How you can help manage shortness of breath

You can help your shortness of breath by:

- being in an environment that is open and airy
- having a fan blowing on your face
- learning breathing techniques (a physiotherapist can help)
- relaxation or meditation.



All medicines have several names.

They each have a:

- proper chemical name (e.g. 4-acetamidophenol).
- generic or common name (e.g. paracetamol).
- few trade names. There are often several different companies that make the same medicine and they each give the medicine a name (e.g. Panadol, Dymadon, Panamax, etc).

Medicines in this brochure are discussed using their generic name. Medicines are also grouped together based on their action in the body.

For example, all the different types of medicines used to treat constipation are called laxatives although they are different chemicals that each work in different ways.

Check with your pharmacist if you are not sure about the name of medicine you are taking or why you are taking it.



# Medicines

# Haloperidol

## What is haloperidol used for?

In small doses like you are taking, haloperidol is used to:

- treat nausea and/or vomiting
- ease restlessness and agitation
- prevent or stop hallucinations.

Haloperidol may also be used to treat schizophrenia or other similar illnesses. If you have any concerns about taking this medicine, consult with your doctor.

## How to take it

- For people with ongoing nausea and/or vomiting, restlessness or hallucinations it is best to take haloperidol regularly (i.e. once or twice a day at the same times each day).
- If you are vomiting a lot then the tablets may not be in your body long enough to work properly. You may need to have haloperidol by infusion (like a 'drip' but going into the skin). It is given this way so that a small amount of drug is in your body all the time.
- It is also given by infusion if you are unable to swallow tablets.
- You may also need to take top up or "breakthrough" doses if you have extra nausea and/or vomiting or restlessness or hallucinations.

## Side effects

As you are taking small doses of haloperidol, side effects are not common. Some side effects are:

- drop in blood pressure when you stand up quickly
- drowsiness
- tremors
- jerky movements or stiffness in muscles.

Let your doctor know immediately if you have these effects.

## Driving a vehicle

Driving is generally not recommended while you are taking haloperidol. Ask your doctor for more information.

## Drug interactions

Haloperidol may cause extra drowsiness if you are taking other medications that cause drowsiness such as:

- sleeping tablets
- some pain medications
- some medicines for nausea or anxiety.

Drinking alcohol may also increase drowsiness.

Taking these medicines together with haloperidol will not stop any of the medicines working but you will need to be more careful with activities that require you to be alert.

# Metoclopramide

## What is metoclopramide used for?

Metoclopramide is a medicine used to manage nausea and/or vomiting.

## How to take it

- For people with ongoing nausea and/or vomiting it is best to take metoclopramide regularly (i.e. 3 or 4 times a day).
- If you are vomiting a lot then the tablets may not be in your body long enough to work properly. You may need to have the metoclopramide by infusion (like a 'drip' but going just under the skin). It is given this way so that a small amount of drug is in your body all the time.
- You may also need to take top up or "breakthrough" doses if you have extra nausea and/or vomiting.

## Side effects

Metoclopramide does not usually cause many side effects. The most common side effect that may occur if you are taking metoclopramide is drowsiness. Other effects include:

- tremors
- jerky movements or stiffness in muscles.

Let your doctor know immediately if you have these effects.

## Driving a vehicle

Driving a vehicle is generally not recommended while you are taking metoclopramide. Ask your doctor for more information.

## Drug interactions

Metoclopramide may cause extra drowsiness if you are taking other medicines that cause drowsiness such as:

- sleeping tablets
- some pain medications
- some medicines for nausea or anxiety.

Drinking alcohol may also increase drowsiness.

Taking these medicines together with metoclopramide will not stop any of the medicines working but you will need to be more careful with activities that require you to be alert.

# Morphine

## What is morphine used for?

Morphine is a medication used to manage pain. It is also sometimes used to help with breathing.

## How to take it

Morphine comes in lots of different tablets, mixtures and injections. Your doctor will discuss with you the best form for you to take.

Generally you will be taking two types of morphine together:

- A 'slow release' tablet or capsule which you take once or twice a day at the same time(s) each day. This releases a small amount of morphine slowly so that you always have some in your body to treat the "background" pain.
- An 'immediate release' mixture or tablet which you can take when you need it for extra pain relief or "breakthrough pain".

If you are not able to swallow tablets or are vomiting a lot then you may need to have the morphine by infusion (like a 'drip' but going just under the skin). It is given this way so that a small amount of drug is in your body all the time.

## Side effects

There are some side effects that may occur if you are taking morphine, for example:

- drowsiness
- nausea and/or vomiting
- constipation
- confusion.

Some of these will stop as you keep taking morphine.

The other effects can be minimised or treated so let your doctor know if you have any problems with your morphine.

## Driving a vehicle

Driving is generally not recommended while you are taking morphine. Ask your doctor for more information.

## Drug interactions

Morphine may cause extra drowsiness if you are taking other medicines that cause drowsiness such as:

- sleeping tablets
- some pain medications
- some medicines for nausea or anxiety.

Drinking alcohol may also increase drowsiness.

Taking these medicines together with morphine will not stop any of the medications working but you will need to be more careful with activities that require you to be alert.

# Paracetamol

## What is paracetamol used for?

Paracetamol is used to treat many types of pain. Even if you have strong pain paracetamol can help. It can give extra pain relief even, if you are taking big doses of strong pain medicines.

## Which paracetamol should I take?

- Paracetamol comes in lots of different tablets, mixtures, suppositories and injections. Talk to your pharmacist, nurse or doctor the best form for you.
- Many medicines contain paracetamol (e.g. cough and cold medicines), check with your pharmacist, nurse or doctor if you are unsure.

## How to take it

- If you have ongoing pain it is best to take paracetamol regularly (i.e. 4 times a day for most types of paracetamol).
- **DO NOT TAKE** more than 4 g of paracetamol in a day.

## Side effects

Paracetamol does not usually cause side effects.  
Do not exceed daily limit.

## Drug interactions

Paracetamol does not usually interact with other medicines.



# Laxatives

## What are laxatives used for?

Laxatives are taken to treat constipation. They are also taken to prevent constipation.

## Which laxative should I take?

There are many laxatives to choose from - check with your pharmacist, nurse or doctor which laxative would be best for you.

## How to take them

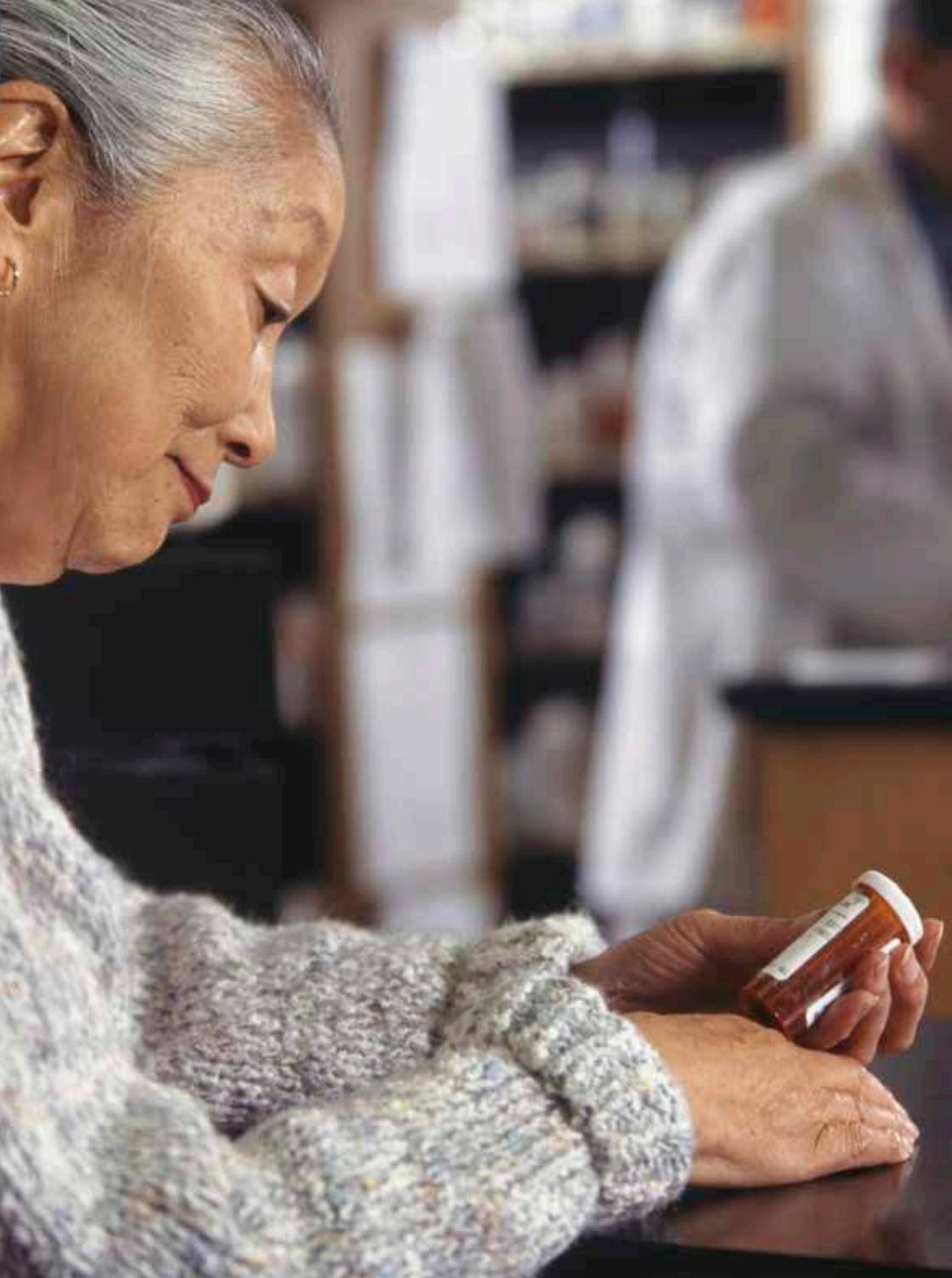
- If you have ongoing constipation it is best to take laxatives regularly (i.e. every day).
- If you are taking morphine (or other strong pain medicines) you will usually need to take laxatives everyday.

## Side effects

Laxatives do not usually cause side effects. Some laxatives may cause stomach cramping.

## Drug interactions

Laxatives in normal doses do not usually interact with other medicines.





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