Your doctor recommends methadone therapy to control your chronic pain. Please read this information carefully. Ask your doctor about anything you don’t understand.

What is methadone? Methadone is a strong pain medicine. It is a synthetic (man-made) drug known as an “opioid.” Doctors use it to treat chronic pain and some types of drug addictions.

It works best when used with self-care and other treatments. The goal of methadone therapy is to reduce pain and help you do everyday activities.

What are the benefits? Methadone targets receptors (special cells) in the brain and spinal cord to reduce pain and the emotional response to pain. Methadone works well for many types of pain because of its slow start and long-lasting effect.

What are the risks? Methadone can cause addiction. The risk is higher in people with a:
- History of addiction to other substances
- Family history of addiction
Talk to your doctor if you are at higher risk.

Methadone is a powerful medicine and can be very dangerous, even fatal, if not taken the way your doctor tells you to. Carefully follow the directions on how to take your medicine.

If you cut back on or stop this medicine abruptly (called “cold turkey”) you may develop withdrawal symptoms. Don’t adjust the dose up or down without talking to your doctor or care team.

How long will methadone take to control pain? It may take 3 to 5 days to feel the full effects of the medicine. It may take 5 or more days for side effects to develop. If you have any side effects, call your doctor right away.

What if I can’t or don’t want to take methadone? If methadone isn’t for you, consult with your doctor for other treatments to help manage your chronic pain.

What are the side effects? Methadone causes less drowsiness, upset stomach, confusion, and constipation than other kinds of strong opioids, and common side effects usually go away with time. These include:
- Constipation (many people need to take a laxative and a stool softener while taking this medicine)
- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Upset stomach
- Dizziness
- Mild drowsiness
- Increased sweating
- Dry mouth
- Flushed or itchy skin

Although rare, there may be some potential cardiac side effects like serious arrhythmias and sudden cardiac death. Your doctor may order an electrocardiogram (EKG) for screening and may monitor you for these side effects.

What safety measures should I follow when taking methadone medicine?
- Avoid driving, using heavy machinery, or doing any activity that requires you to be alert until you get used to the way the medicine affects you. When you start this medicine or when your doctor increases the dose, it may cause drowsiness.
- Talk with your doctor before you start your medicine, if you drink alcohol. Mixing alcohol and opioids can lead to rapid release of the medicine and cause overdose or serious side effects, including slowed breathing, coma, and death.
- Talk with your doctor before you use medicines such as tranquilizers or sleep aids.
- Do not eat grapefruit or drink grapefruit juice, which can interfere with your medicine.
- Carefully follow the directions on how to take your medicine. Do not adjust the dose up or down yourself without talking to your doctor or care team.
• Keep medicines in a safe place where children or pets can’t get to them.
• Use birth control to prevent pregnancy and talk with your doctor if you are thinking of becoming pregnant, or are currently pregnant or breastfeeding.
• Extra doses of other pain medicines may be needed to help pain that is stronger than usual (breakthrough pain).

**Will methadone affect how other medicines work?**
Some prescription medicines or herbal remedies may not combine well with methadone. Tell your doctor if you are taking any over-the-counter medicines and herbal remedies such as St. John’s wort. Medicines that may cause problems with methadone include:

- Carbamazepine (Tegretol)
- Fluoxetine (Prozac)
- Fluvoxamine (Luvox)
- Phenobarbital (Barbita)
- Antivirals (such as Nevirapine, Ritonavir)
- Rifampin (Rifadin)
- Erythromycin (E-Mycin)
- Phenytoin (Dilantin)
- Ketoconazole (Nizoral)
- Fluconazole (Diflucan)

**Overdose information**
If you think you or someone else has taken an overdose, **call 911**.

The amount that could cause symptoms of overdose may be different for each person. How much opioids a person has taken before, as well as how much they have taken now, might affect whether they have symptoms of overdose. Signs of overdose may include:

- Slow and shallow breathing
- Slow, fast, or not normal heartbeat
- Dizziness, light-headedness, loss of consciousness, fainting, or passing out
- Very small (pinpoint) pupils
- Cold, clammy, or blue skin
- Muscle twitching or weakness
- Low body temperature
- Deep sleep

**Tips to help you remember to take your medicine**
Everyone sometimes has trouble remembering to do things on a regular schedule. There are a number of ways to help you remember. Check off things you might try:

- Make a simple chart and post it where you’ll see it every day, like on the mirror in the bathroom.
- Set an alarm clock, watch, or cell phone alarm as a reminder.
- Establish a daily routine for taking your medications, such as at bedtime or mealtime.
- Use a pillbox that has sections for the days of the week.
- Record taking your medications on a wallet card or calendar.
- Can you think of others?

**Have more questions?**
If you’d like more information on methadone, you can call or email your doctor or care team.

Also, check the drug encyclopedia at [kp.org/medications](http://kp.org/medications) to learn more about the medicine your doctor prescribed for you.

**Additional resources**
For more health information, tools, classes, and other resources:

- Search [kp.org/mydoctor](http://kp.org/mydoctor) or [kp.org](http://kp.org)
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department

If you are hit, hurt or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to [ndvh.org](http://ndvh.org).