What is methadone?

Methadone is a long-acting narcotic medication. It is an effective and legal treatment for opiate use disorders. Although methadone is effective as opiate replacement treatment and may provide benefit with other drug use disorders, additional aspects of treatment (such as counselling and linking with other supports) will enhance your overall progress and the ability to make positive changes. Methadone maintenance programs help individuals with opiate use disorder stabilize their lives and reduce the harm associated with drug use.

How is methadone taken?

Methadone is usually dispensed as a liquid to 100mL Tang or other crystalline juice. Doses are usually taken once a day as the effects of a single dose last for about one day. Your physician or nurse practitioner will write a prescription specifying your dose and how often you need to come to the pharmacy.

How does methadone work?

Methadone is part of a long-term maintenance program for individuals with opiate dependence. Because methadone works slowly, drug cravings are reduced without producing a “high”. The goal is to find the dose that will prevent physical withdrawal without causing side effects. The right dose will decrease the physical side effects of withdrawal and help you to reduce or eliminate the use of opiates.

You will develop a tolerance to the medication. If you abruptly stop taking the medication, withdrawal symptoms will develop.

For your safety, the methadone dose may need to be withheld if you appear to be sedated or intoxicated.

How long do I have to stay on methadone?

You should stay on methadone for as long as you experience benefits. Everyone responds differently and methadone can be taken safely for years. You will develop a tolerance to methadone and withdrawal symptoms will develop if you stop taking it suddenly. If at any time, you want to stop taking methadone, you should discuss it with your physician or nurse practitioner.

Initially, methadone is prescribed as a daily witnessed dose, then as your treatment progresses you may be eligible to receive some doses as take home doses.

Will I always have to come to the pharmacy every day to receive my methadone dose?
As your treatment progresses and depending on certain aspects of your progress, you may be eligible to have take-home doses. The first dose will always be witnessed by a pharmacist.

In order to provide you with the best care possible, it is preferable that you receive all your medications from only one pharmacy.

Does methadone have side effects?

Methadone is usually well tolerated once the dose is stabilized. Many people experience minor side effects, but they can be managed with the help of your pharmacist, physician or nurse practitioner. Be sure to let them know if any of these side effects are bothering you:

- **Sweating** can be due to the methadone itself, or a dose that is too high or too low.
- **Constipation** may be prevented by increasing exercise, fluids and fibre in your diet.
- **Sexual difficulties** may occur.
- **Sleepiness or drowsiness** may be caused by too much methadone or may occur during dosage adjustments. If this occurs, consult your prescriber to have your dose adjusted. When you feel drowsy, do not drive a car, operate machinery or participate in activities that require you to be alert. For safety reasons, your methadone may be withheld if you appear sedated or intoxicated.
- **Weight change** – An increase in body weight may be due to better health and an improved appetite.

Can methadone interact with other drugs?

Yes. Alcohol and drugs, including prescription, non-prescription, herbal and street drugs can affect how methadone works in your body and in some cases can be dangerous. Discuss all medications you are taking with your pharmacist, physician or nurse practitioner.

Is methadone dangerous?

Methadone is safe to use when it is prescribed and monitored by a physician or nurse practitioner. It can be very dangerous if used inappropriately. Methadone should never be taken by anybody except the person for whom it is prescribed as overdose and death can occur if the person is not dependent on opiates. Children are especially at risk for overdose and death if they swallow methadone accidentally.

Important Methadone Overdose Information for the Patient

- Methadone overdose is a medical emergency.
- Methadone is a long-acting medication and can stay in your body for a very long time.
- Even if you have been on methadone for a long time, taking more methadone than your body is used to can be dangerous. Even a small dose increase can be dangerous.
- If you are new to methadone or have not been taking your regular dose, even for a few days, you are at increased risk of overdose.
• Taking too much methadone can result in difficulty breathing (slow or willow breathing), drowsiness, small pupils, and, in some cases, coma and death.
• For this reason, **IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT YOU GO TO THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT** to be observed for a minimum of 10 hours, and maybe longer, depending on your symptoms.
• There is drug treatment available that can reverse the effects that you may get from taking too much methadone.

Are there any other cautions?

With stabilization on therapy, fertility may improve, so family planning/contraception should be a consideration.

Due to the sedation and/or withdrawal symptoms which may be present during the stabilization period or periods of instability, driving an automobile or operating machinery may be dangerous.

*Opiate toxicity* or overdose may be experienced as drowsiness/nodding off, slurred speech, staggering/tripping, or confusion.

*Withdrawal* may be experienced as: restlessness, sweating, dilated pupils, joint aches, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, tremor, anxiety, runny nose and/or teary eyes.

What is my responsibility?

Your responsibility is to drink your methadone dose every day. If you have take home doses, you must make sure that they are stored safely to prevent possible ingestion by anyone else. If you store your take home doses in the fridge, you must ensure that they are not accessible to anyone else. Methadone can be very dangerous if used inappropriately so you must not give or sell your dose to anyone.

The law requires that you inform any prescriber if you have received a narcotic from another prescriber within the preceding thirty-day period.

Will methadone cure me?

Methadone will help reduce and manage your withdrawal symptoms and help you to make positive lifestyle changes that will reduce the risk of harm to yourself and others. The goal of treatment is to stabilize your body physically and to provide an environment that supports you.

Is there any special information regarding take home doses?

If you receive take home doses, you should be aware of the following risks:
• You will lose tolerance to the dose of methadone on which you have been stabilized if you haven’t consumed that dose for three consecutive days
• If you have not consumed this dose of methadone which you are about to ingest on each day of the past three days, you could become seriously ill, require hospitalization or die
• If you have not consumed the dose of methadone which you are going to ingest on the pickup day on each day of the previous three days, you should talk with your physician or nurse practitioner and obtain a prescription that reflects the actual dose you have been consuming.