

# Opioids Aware

A resource for patients and healthcare professionals to support prescribing of opioid medicines for pain

There has been a sharp and sustained increase in the prescription of opioid painkillers in recent years. The latest figures from 2014 show that 22.75 million prescriptions were written in England with a total cost of nearly £305 million to the NHS. Similar rises in prescribing in the US and elsewhere have been accompanied by increases in harms related to these drugs including addiction, unintentional overdose and death. Opioid painkiller problems in the UK have not reached the epidemic proportions seen in the US but we know that over 5% of adults in England and Wales have used opioid medicines that were not prescribed for them in the past year.

Of more concern is that nearly all the rise in prescribing has been for treatment for long-term pain however, opioid medicines are often ineffective for this condition. About 4% of the population in England and Wales is in receipt of a prescription for opioids and once opioids are started they can be difficult to stop.

In the UK and other countries, guidelines for prescribers on the use of opioids have been available but awareness of guidelines and their use has been disappointing. Perhaps the most important message to prescribers is that if medicines (of any sort) do not work for the patient they should be stopped. This is clearly not happening in the case of opioids and patients and prescribers often make the decision to try increasingly high doses. This is almost never helpful and substantially increases the risk of harm from opioids.

Today sees the launch of Opioids Aware, a new resource for all prescribers, patients and their carers to support safe and rational use of opioid medicines. The resource has been developed by healthcare professionals and policy groups. Contributions from several medical royal colleges, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, the British Pain Society, Public Health England, NHS England, NICE, the CQC and the NHS Business Services Authority have helped to ensure that Opioids Aware is relevant for everyone involved in the decision to prescribe and take opioid medicines. Opioids Aware is a web-based resource, funded by Public Health England and hosted by the Faculty of Pain Medicine, Royal College of Anaesthetists and can be found at:

[www.fpm.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware](http://www.fpm.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware)