



Health  
Education  
Spotlight Series

Focus #3:  
Opioids in  
Palliative Care

**As healthcare providers (HCP), one of our many roles includes patient and family health education. Patients with life-limiting/threatening illnesses and their families may have misconceptions, or a lack of knowledge, related to the use of opioids for pain and symptom management. These misunderstandings can create barriers to the successful management of symptoms.**

HCPs should be aware of resources to support patient/family education as they pertain to the safe use of opioids in palliative care as well as the common misconceptions around opioids. Some useful resources include:

- ❖ [Does Morphine Make Death Come Sooner?](#)
- ❖ [Some Common Misconceptions about Opioids](#)
- ❖ [Understanding Safe Opioid Use in Pain Management](#)
- ❖ [Morphine: Myths and Reality](#)

Patients/families often express worry about side effects that may occur when starting opioids. As HCPs, we can help empower them to take opioid medications in a safe and effective way by teaching them:

- ❖ the differences between anaphylactic allergy response, side effects, and adverse events
- ❖ the common side effects to look out for (i.e., nausea, drowsiness, constipation) and when to report these to their HCP, as they might need other medications to help reduce the side effects they are experiencing (i.e., antiemetics for nausea etc.)
- ❖ after a few days on the opioid, a patient's body will develop a tolerance to it, and their side effects will begin to subside
- ❖ we need to consider a patient's individual factors (i.e., liver/kidney impairment, frailty, co-morbidities etc.) when selecting an opioid, its starting dose, and making titration changes. Doing this helps us to prevent or minimize a patient experiencing unpleasant side effects from opioids.

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Useful resources to consider when teaching patients/families about the use of opioids:

- ❖ [Caregiver Support Education- Pain: How to Recognize It and How to Help](#)
- ❖ [A Caregiver's Guide: A Handbook About End-of-Life Care](#) (Page 72-77)

**References/Resources:**

- [Canadian Virtual Hospice](#)
- [Get Palliative Care](#)
- [Hospice Palliative Care Ontario \(HPCO\)](#)
- [HPC Consultation Services](#)
- [Saint Lazarus Canada](#)
- [Virtual Hospice](#)