OPIOID TAPERING – *when reducing or discontinuing an opioid in chronic non-cancer pain (CNCP).*

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A) General Considerations

1) Determine if the goal of dose reduction is reasonable (e.g. opioids have demonstrated some benefit) or if complete discontinuation is more suitable (e.g. trial has been highly problematic/ineffective or opioid induced hyperalgesia is a concern).

2) If goal is to reduce dose, option to taper further & more gradually may be considered at a later point. Tapering plan may be held/reassessed at any point if pain/function deteriorates or withdrawal symptoms persist. However, the "hold off on further taper & plan to restart taper" conversation should have a designated endpoint and be one conversation, not two!

3) Gradual tapers can often be completed in the range of 2 weeks to 6 months. However, some may benefit from a longer time frame of 18 to 24 months.

4) **Initial daily dose reductions in the range of 10% every 1-2+ weeks are reasonable.[1] Once 1/3 of the original dose is reached, smaller dose reductions (e.g. 5% every 2-4+ weeks) may be more optimal for a successful taper.[1] (May require formulation change).**

5) Formulations that offer smaller dose increments are useful for more gradual tapers once in the lower end of the dosage range. {Examples: morphine long-acting: M-Eslon 10mg cap $_{q12h}$, KADIAN 10mg cap $_{q24h}$}

6) More rapid tapers are possible & sometimes desired. In such cases, use of an opioid withdrawal scale (OWS) & corresponding protocols may be recommended, allowing for successful withdrawal within 1-2 weeks. (See links)[2,3]

7) Given the complexities in some cases, discussion with experienced colleagues and an interdisciplinary approach will help optimize management. Continue to use "best practice" tools (e.g. *Opioid Manager* form from Canadian guidelines, urine drug screens, etc).

PATIENT MANAGEMENT

1) Anticipate withdrawal effects & have a plan to manage.

2) Optimize other pain management (e.g. addition of co-analgesics for neuropathic pain such as nortriptyline, duloxetine, gabapentin or pregabalin).

3) Encourage functional goal setting and efforts to enhance non-drug approaches in management plan.

4) Strongly caution patients that a) they have lost their tolerance to opioids after as little as a week or two of abstinence, and b) they are at risk for overdose if they relapse/resume their original dose.

B) Timeline & Tips for Stopping or Reaching a Taper "Target Dose"

- Allow for gradual q3 day, weekly, bi-weekly or monthly dose reductions. Reassess as necessary. In general, the longer the duration of previous opioid therapy, the more time should be allotted for tapering.
- May switch to 50-60% equivalent morphine dose if not already on. Reduced dose accounts for incomplete cross tolerance. See Opioid Manager Switching Tool.
- Last 20-60 mg (morphine equivalent) may require more time.

C) Opioid Withdrawal Symptoms (See table to the right.)

- **Many of these symptoms may <u>not</u> be seen with a gradual taper!**
- Physical withdrawal symptoms generally resolve by 5-10 days following opioid dose reduction/cessation.
- Psychological withdrawal symptoms (dysphoria, insomnia) may take longer.

EARLY symptoms may include:	LATE symptoms may include:	PROLONGED symptoms may include:
- anxiety / restlessness - sweating - rapid short respirations - runny nose, tearing eyes (minor) - dilated reactive pupils	- runny nose, tearing eyes - rapid breathing, yawning - tremor, diffuse muscle spasms/aches - pilo-erection - nausea and vomiting; diarrhea - abdominal pain - fever, chills - ↑ white blood cells (if sudden withdrawal)	- irritability, fatigue, psychological - bradycardia - decreased body temperature
Early = hours to days **Late** = days to weeks **Prolonged** = weeks to months		◆ Some people with chronic pain will find that symptoms such as fatigue and general well-being improve over time with tapering of the opioid. In such cases, <u>gradual gains in function</u> will be possible & should be explored.

D) Management of Other Withdrawal Related Side Effects

<u>Aches/Pains/Myalgia</u>:

⇨ **NSAID** (e.g. naproxen 375-500mg twice daily or ibuprofen 400-600mg four times daily)**:** useful for pain & withdrawal.

⇨ **Acetaminophen** (650-1000mg every 6 hours as needed) may be used for *aches, pains, flu-like symptoms.*

<u>Bowel Function (Constipation / Diarrhea)</u>:

⇨ **Laxative** - continue initially to prevent constipation; with time, reduce, hold & eventually stop laxative (See Opioid Induced Constipation Q&A online) [4]

⇨ **Loperamide** - used if necessary for *diarrhea*; may not need with gradual taper.

<u>Nausea/Vomiting</u>:

⇨ **Dimenhydrinate** 50-100mg every 6 hours as needed [Alternatives: prochlorperazine 5-10mg po q6-8h; haloperidol 0.5-1mg po q8-12h]

<u>Anxiety, Irrritability, Lacrimation, Cramps, Rhinorrhea, Diaphoresis, Insomnia</u>:

⇨ **hydroxyzine** 25-50mg po TID PRN (or sometimes just needed at HS)

<u>Insomnia</u>:

⇨ **Non-drug & "sleep hygiene"** measures should be employed (e.g. regular bedtime/wake-time; sleep restriction).[5,6,7] If pharmacologic treatment necessary, short-term **trazodone** would be an option (25mg po HS up to 100mg).

<u>Physical Withdrawal Symptoms (general)</u>:

⇨ **Clonidine 0.1mg twice daily may be prescribed for general relief/prevention**. Initial test dose 0.1mg x1; check BP & HR 1 hr later (if BP <90/60, postural hypotension, or HR <60, do not prescribe further). May titrate up to 4 times daily. Reassess in 3-7 days; taper to stop. [Cochrane review documented typical clonidine use for 7-14 days; longest duration was for 30 days.[8]]
Clonidine not routinely needed if gradual taper.

See also the RxFiles Opioid Tapering Template - version of this document, online.
http://www.rxfiles.ca/rxfiles/uploads/documents/Opioid-Taper-Template.pdf