

Learn about opioids before you start taking them: new NPS MedicineWise survey findings

New YouGov Galaxy survey results* released today by NPS MedicineWise show that although most people surveyed (79%) know that there is a link between opioids and dependence, most really aren't sure what an opioid is.

A new [animated video](#), also released today by NPS MedicineWise and the Faculty of Pain Medicine of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) will provide information to people who may be considering opioids for chronic non-cancer pain.

Opioids are a class of medicines taken to help reduce pain. They work on the central nervous system to slow down nerve signals between the brain and the body. This can reduce feelings of pain, but opioids can also produce adverse effects, ranging from constipation to dangerous slowing down of a person's breathing.

According to the survey, only half of those surveyed were able to correctly identify morphine (56%), oxycodone (51%) and codeine (49%) as opioid medicines with only one in four respondents correctly identifying tramadol (27%) and fentanyl (26%) as opioid medicines.

Conversely, one in three participants incorrectly thought that paracetamol (32%) and ibuprofen (31%) were opioid medicines.

Associate Prof Michael Vagg, Dean at the Faculty of Pain Medicine ANZCA, says the new video helps people make a decision in partnership with their doctor about whether to start taking an opioid medicine.

Dr Jill Thistlethwaite, GP and medical adviser at NPS MedicineWise, says that improving knowledge is the first step to tackling opioid related harm. Every day in Australia three people die and 150 are hospitalised because of harm from pharmaceutical opioids.

"It's positive the majority of people we surveyed were aware they can become dependent on opioids, as this is one of the major problems of these medicines," says Dr Thistlethwaite.

"Being dependent on opioids means that if you stop taking them suddenly or over a short time, you may experience pain, sweating, diarrhoea and other withdrawal effects.

"While people know about opioid dependence, only just over a third (37%) of survey respondents knew that using an opioid in the long term can actually make the pain worse.

"Taking opioids for a long period of time can make people's bodies adapt and become more sensitive to pain and feel more pain," she says.

Stuart Leamer is a 67 year-old from a small farming community near Geelong in Victoria. He hurt his back helping a friend build a house, and has been living with back pain ever since.

"I started with Panadol, then Panadeine, then Panadeine Forte. In the end, 20 years later, I was taking the much stronger oxycodone and MS Contin – slow release morphine," says Mr Leamer.

"Things changed when I was admitted to hospital with pneumonia. I spent 1.5 weeks in intensive care, where I was taken off opioids.

“It was two or three weeks of hell, but now things are so much better. My kids and grandkids tell me how I have changed. I feel so much better mentally and physically. I started enjoying life.

“When you are on opioids, you don’t understand what they are doing to you. I should have done this 15 years ago,” he says.

“Mr Leamer’s story shows just how important it is to understand more about opioid medicines, the risks involved, and the importance of agreeing on an exit strategy upfront to stop taking opioids when they are no longer needed,” says A/Prof Vagg.

“People can watch the video with their doctor or at home to help them make an informed decision about whether opioids are the best treatment option for their pain,” he says.

More information on the new NPS MedicineWise educational program *Opioids, chronic pain and the bigger picture* is available at www.nps.org.au/opioids.

** Poll of 1,037 adults representative of the Australian population conducted by YouGov Galaxy in November 2019 for NPS MedicineWise.*

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Spokespeople are available for media interviews.

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