

# Sublingual Fentanyl (Under the tongue use)

## What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a medication that helps ease pain and breathlessness. Fentanyl works like morphine which is also commonly used to help pain and breathing difficulties. Fentanyl is often used if morphine has caused problems or if your kidneys are not working well.

## How do I take sublingual fentanyl?

Sometimes pain or breathlessness comes on quickly (over minutes) and may last for minutes to a few hours. Fentanyl taken sublingually (placed under the tongue) works quickly (within 15-30 minutes) and can help to ease pain and breathlessness. Fentanyl is not effective if swallowed.

Fentanyl comes as a liquid in a small glass or plastic container called an ampoule. It is usually used for injections, but you can avoid injections by taking it sublingually. The liquid fentanyl must be drawn up i.e. put into a syringe. Your nurse will either draw up some fentanyl for you to keep until you need to use it or may teach you how to draw it up yourself. (See the separate patient information sheet 'Drawing up Sublingual fentanyl').

## 7 Steps to using Sublingual Fentanyl:

*Do not use Sublingual Fentanyl if you are too sleepy to swallow safely*

1. Sit or stand upright
2. Raise your tongue to the roof of your mouth
3. Slowly squirt the contents of the syringe under your tongue and keep the liquid there
4. Tilt your head down a little to help avoid swallowing the medicine
5. Hold the medicine under your tongue for at least 2 minutes and if possible for 5 minutes to allow the medicine to be absorbed into your body
6. Avoid opening your mouth, eating, or talking during this time
7. Any remaining sublingual fentanyl that is in your mouth can be swallowed or spat out

## How long will I need to take sublingual fentanyl?

You will take sublingual fentanyl as long as it is helping your pain or breathlessness. Discuss this with your doctor or nurse.

## What if I still have pain or breathlessness?

Sublingual fentanyl usually works within 15-30 minutes. If you still have pain or breathlessness after 30 minutes, take another dose. Your doctor or nurse will tell you, and write down, how often you can take the sublingual fentanyl.

Let your nurse or doctor know if:

- Two doses of Sublingual Fentanyl in a row aren't helping your pain as your fentanyl may need to be increased
- You find it difficult to keep the liquid under tongue. You may need a different medicine
- You have frequent attacks of pain or breathlessness each day. You may need to start or increase another medicine

## Will I need to keep increasing my dose over time?

After starting sublingual fentanyl, your dose may need to be changed to find out how much works best for you. The dose is different for everyone. Once this right dose is found, you should take it if you have periods of pain and breathlessness.

The same dose of fentanyl often relieves pain for months. You may need a higher dose in the future; this does not usually mean fentanyl is losing its effect.

## What if fentanyl doesn't work for me?

If fentanyl is not helping your pain or does not agree with you your doctor will suggest other pain relief medicine.

## Will I become addicted?

Addiction is almost never a problem when fentanyl is used for pain or breathlessness. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you are worried about addiction.

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### **What are the common side effects?**

**Constipation:** this is common, but usually not as bad with fentanyl as some other pain relievers. Eating fibre foods (fruit, vegetables) and drinking plenty of fluid helps. You usually will also need to take daily medication (laxative) to keep your bowels moving.

**Diarrhoea:** a very few people, after changing to fentanyl from a more constipating pain reliever, have an increased bowel activity (diarrhoea and/or wind) for a few days. Your laxative may need to be reduced or stopped for a short time.

**Nausea (feeling sick):** If this happens, it usually only lasts for a few days after starting or increasing the dose and usually settles quickly. Anti-sickness medicine can help if needed.

**Sleepiness:** fentanyl can make you feel a little sleepy especially when you first start to take it. This usually improves after a few days. Seek medical advice if you are feeling too drowsy, muddled, or are unsteady on your feet as your medicine will need to be reviewed.

Some uncommon side effects of fentanyl include dry mouth, sweating, blurred vision, itching, vivid dreams and problems passing urine. (This is not a complete list).

### **Can I drive?**

You should not drive if you have just started taking fentanyl, your dose has just increased or you have taken sublingual fentanyl in the last hour. It is likely you will be able to drive once you are on a steady dose of fentanyl and if you are not suffering from side effects.

Do not drive if:

- You feel tired or sleepy
- You are not able to concentrate
- You are feeling weak or in pain
- You are dizzy or are unable to see properly
- The light is low or at night as fentanyl can make it more difficult to see in the dark

If you are unsure whether or not you should drive, wait until you have talked to your doctor or nurse. If in doubt, don't drive.

Never operate any heavy machinery when you are taking sublingual fentanyl.

### **Can I drink alcohol?**

Yes. A small amount of alcohol is safe to drink if you are taking fentanyl. Sometimes the two together may make you feel sleepy or 'tipsy' more quickly than usual, so drink less than you usually would. **Do not drive if you have had both fentanyl and alcohol in the previous few hours.**

### **How should I store sublingual fentanyl?**

Store the unopened fentanyl ampoules at room temperature. If the fentanyl is drawn up into syringes, then store them in the fridge. They last for up to 3 days when drawn up.

### **Keeping yourself safe when using fentanyl**

Some medicines can affect how well the fentanyl works. It is important to tell your medical team of all the medicines you are taking or are thinking of taking. This includes medicines or complementary therapies (herbal medicines) you may have bought yourself, or have been given by others.

### **Seek immediate medical help if taken in overdose as this could be life threatening.**

Symptoms of a fentanyl overdose include extreme drowsiness, fainting and slow breathing (breathing may stop).

### **Keeping others safe when using sublingual fentanyl**

Like all medicines, fentanyl can be dangerous if taken by people for whom it was not intended. To reduce this risk:

- ✓ Store your fentanyl in a safe place, out of sight and easy reach of others, especially children
- ✓ Do not share it with others, even if they have pain or breathlessness
- ✓ Return all unused fentanyl ampoules to your pharmacy

### **Fentanyl is unlicensed for use sublingually.**

Medicines are generally registered in New Zealand for specific purposes. Fentanyl is not registered in NZ for giving sublingually although it can be prescribed "off-licence" for sublingual use. There is research and experience in using it sublingually and many people have used it and been helped. This is not an uncommon situation for many medications used in palliative care. If you would like to more about this, ask your doctor.

**If you have any questions or concerns please contact your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.**