

Changes to availability of pain medication on June 1: How will you be affected?

From 1 June 2020, several regulatory changes will take place that will impact the prescribing of opioids as well as access to Modified Release Paracetamol for the management of pain. These changes form part of [a broader suite of measures](#) intended to support appropriate use of opioids and other pain medications, including education and awareness campaigns, changes to clinical guidelines and ongoing prescription and compliance monitoring.

Broadly, these changes will [see smaller quantities, changes to the 'indications' that will be funded, and changes to the authority process required for opioids to be subsidised. MR Paracetamol will also be up scheduled to an over the counter pharmacy product.](#)

The smaller pack sizes of opioids will provide a simplified way for health practitioners to prescribe smaller quantities of immediate release opioids for acute, short-term treatment. The existing larger pack sizes will still be available for those who need them, however Modified Release opioids will no longer be indicated for PBS subsidy for acute pain episodes unless part of a chronic condition.

For example, following a minor procedure you may currently be given a packet containing a week's worth of opioids upon discharge, which will be reduced to two- or three-days medication supply now.

If you require opioid treatment for a long period of time, for example if you have cancer or are receiving palliative care, you will continue to receive the same opioid medications in the same way, with the same pack sizes as you do now.

Importantly, if you require opioids for the long-term treatment of chronic pain you will still be able to access larger pack sizes and prescribers will be able to prescribe repeats where they meet the new restrictions requirements.

To be eligible for treatment with certain high-strength opioids such as morphine and fentanyl under the PBS, you will need to be unresponsive or intolerant to other medications or treatments, or have achieved inadequate relief of acute pain to maximum tolerated doses of non-opioid treatments.

For chronic pain, your health practitioner may be authorised to provide increased quantities and/or repeats if you meet the restriction requirements. Increased quantities to extend treatment up to one month may be requested by your practitioner via telephone/electronic authority request, and up to 3 months' supply (up to 1-month quantity and up to 2 repeats) may be requested via an electronic/written authority request.

To ensure appropriate use of opioid medicines for the management of pain, you must also be referred to a pain specialist or alternative prescriber for clinical review if opioid use exceeds or is expected to exceed 12 months. The date of the review and name of the medical practitioner consulted must now be provided for every authority application. A list of pain services across Australia is available on the [Painaustralia website](#).

It is also important to note that **rapid opioid dose reduction also poses risks** including more severe pain and neuro-psychological effects. You should not make any changes to your usual medication without consultation with a prescribing practitioner. If your usual medication for chronic pain includes opioids it is important to discuss longer term opioid strategy with your prescriber. A common recommendation involves slow opioid weaning, with negotiation about when to start, rate of reduction and use of self-management strategies. Alternatively, opioids can be continued provided the necessary indications are met and authorities are in place.

These measures align with broader Australian Government initiatives to improve appropriate pain management, particularly the [National Strategic Action Plan for Pain Management](#). This strategic plan, which is currently being considered by the Council of Australian Governments will address issues of pain management holistically and will ensure the appropriate support is available in areas of need. Importantly, the regulatory changes will not lead to a ban on prescribing opioids to any category of patient if it is considered to be clinically appropriate.

Modified Release Paracetamol will move to a Schedule 3 listing, so you will still be able to purchase this from a pharmacy without a prescription but this product will only be available over the counter.

Painaustralia will continue to work with the Government to inform these ongoing reforms and to ensure that these measures carefully support and maintain the safe and clinically appropriate use of opioids without restricting prescribers from accessing them for their patients when needed.

You can also find information and useful resources about opioid medicines and chronic pain at NPS MedicineWise website at: <https://www.nps.org.au/consumers/opioid-medicines>.