Methadone

What is methadone?
Methadone is a medication that is used to treat chronic pain. It is also used to help prevent withdrawal from a group of drugs called opioids, which are similar to morphine. For example, people may take methadone daily to treat chronic pain, such as severe long-lasting back pain, or to treat dependence on opioids such as pain pills or heroin.

Can methadone be abused?
Methadone causes similar effects to drugs like morphine, such as sleepiness, and may be abused by some individuals. Patients who are prescribed methadone daily can develop tolerance to methadone’s effects, which means it takes a higher dose to cause the same effects. This may cause some individuals to feel they need a higher dose, which can result in some patients taking too much of this medication.

What happens if I take too much methadone?
Taking too much methadone causes sleepiness, a dangerously slow rate of breathing, and can cause abnormal heart rhythms. Slow breathing and abnormal heart rhythms can lead to passing out or even death.

What happens if a child accidentally takes methadone?
Methadone is extremely dangerous for children. If a child eats even one pill, he or she may die from stopping breathing or dangerous heart rhythms. Methadone pills must be kept out of reach of children at all times. If a child may have accidentally eaten methadone, that child must be taken to an emergency department immediately.

What are the side effects of methadone?
Other side effects of taking methadone include feeling lightheaded, nausea, constipation and lack of appetite. Even taking a normal dose of methadone can cause abnormal heart rhythm conduction, so a healthcare provider may check a patient’s heart regularly during methadone treatment.

What is the treatment for methadone poisoning?
An individual who has taken too much methadone, or a child who has taken even one methadone pill, may need to be treated with oxygen, artificial breathing, and a medication called naloxone which can reverse the effects of the methadone. Patients with abnormal heart rhythms or low blood pressure
might need intravenous fluids and strong heart medications to keep the heart beating regularly and to keep the blood pressure normal. Many individuals with methadone poisoning will need to stay in the hospital.

**If I stop taking methadone, are there side effects?**

If a person who is used to taking methadone every day stops taking this medication, side effects can include feeling irritable, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, sweating, shaking and fast heart rate. If a person wishes to stop taking methadone, it is best to have a healthcare professional help, as there is a way to gradually stop taking methadone, and there are medicines to help with the side effects of stopping methadone.

**Is methadone detectable in the urine?**

Some urine drug tests will detect methadone, but not all drug tests check for methadone in the urine.

**Does methadone interact with other medications?**

Methadone can interact with other medications a person is taking. Medicines used to treat psychiatric disease such as depression or anxiety, and pain medicines, can be dangerous to take at the same time as methadone. It is important to talk to a healthcare provider before starting or stopping any medication and to find out if it is okay to take medications in combination.

Created by Gillian Beauchamp, MD. These answers are provided by volunteer medical toxicologists for the purpose of public education, and do not necessarily represent the policies or positions of the American College of Medical Toxicology.

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