

Pain management after childbirth

May 2024

Following birth, many women will experience differing levels of discomfort. This discomfort may be due to your birth, perineal trauma or afterbirth cramps. Postnatally, to aid in your healing and rest, staff will recommend medication to assist in pain management.

The medication you are offered will be determined by your

- Type of birth (vaginal/caesarean)
- Amount of discomfort you are experiencing
- Medical history and whether you are taking other medications

Whilst taking the pain relief medications described in this leaflet, you should not take any other pain medications unless you have discussed this with your care provider.

There are three common types of pain-relief medications:

- Simple pain relief (paracetamol)
- Anti-inflammatories (ibuprofen/diclofenac)
- Opioids (tramadol/tapentadol/oxycodone)

Using a mix of pain relief medications can provide better pain relief and reduce the likelihood and severity of common side effects. Pain medications are usually given as a regular dose, with additional medication if you still have pain (known as “breakthrough pain”).

Staff will discuss with you:

- the type of medication offered
- recommended dosage, including times
- common side effects
- medications not to be used at the same time
- which medication you have been given to take home

Simple Pain Relief

Paracetamol (Panadol/Panamax) is a mild pain relief medication and is well tolerated with few side effects. Paracetamol is considered safe to take whilst

breastfeeding. While taking paracetamol, you should not take any other medicine (e.g. over-the-counter medicine) containing paracetamol, e.g. cold and flu tablets or other brands of paracetamol.

The recommended dose is 1g (two 500mg tablets or caplets) every six hours (four times a day). Do not take more than 8 tablets (= 4g paracetamol) in 24 hours.

Anti-Inflammatories

Anti-inflammatory medications aim to reduce pain caused by inflammation and swelling. Although usually well-tolerated, these medications can cause indigestion, heartburn, reflux, diarrhoea, abdominal pain or increase asthma symptoms. Where possible, these medications should be taken with or soon after food. Diclofenac and ibuprofen are considered safe to take whilst breastfeeding. You can take either diclofenac or ibuprofen, but not both at the same time.

- **Diclofenac** (Voltaren) is a strong anti-inflammatory.

The recommended dose is 50mg (one tablet) every eight hours (three times a day).

- **Ibuprofen** (Nurofen/Advil/Brufen) is another anti-inflammatory used as an alternative to diclofenac. It is slightly less potent, but milder on the stomach.

The recommended dose is 200mg-400mg (one-two tablets) every eight hours (three times a day).

Opioids

Opioids are stronger pain-relieving medications used for moderate to severe pain. Opioids may be offered when your pain is not controlled with simple pain medications.

Common side effects include dizziness, nausea and vomiting, confusion, constipation, and drowsiness. Due to the sedating effect, it is not advisable to drink alcohol or drive a vehicle while taking these medications. Laxatives may be required if you experience constipation.

- **Tramadol** (Zydol/Tramedo/Tramal) & **Tapentadol** (Palexia) are moderate to strong pain medications.

The recommended dose is 50-100mg (one-two tablets) up to four times a day when required for moderate to severe pain.

- **Oxycodone** (Endone/OxyNorm) is a strong pain medication, like morphine. Side effects are more common with this medication. This medication is commonly used for “breakthrough pain” that hasn’t been controlled with simple pain relief. You are only advised to take it for short periods or as required for breakthrough pain. If it is used for relief or breakthrough pain, regular pain medicine should be continued, and oxycodone added to ‘top-up’ your pain relief when required.

The recommended dose is 5-10mg (one-two tablets or capsules) up to four times a day when required for severe pain.

Tramadol, Tapentadol and Oxycodone are regarded as safe for use when breast feeding. However, if you are concerned that your baby is tired or not feeding well, please seek prompt medical advice.

When taking tramadol, tapentadol or oxycodone please be aware of the sedating effects of these medications and the increased risk of falling asleep with your baby in your arms. It is recommended not to co-sleep with your infant when you are taking these medications.

How long will I need to take pain relief medications for?

Women’s experiences of pain vary. Following birth, your body needs time to heal and recover.

Discuss with your midwife and or doctor the best pain relief for you.

Everyone is different but we would expect you need:

- Simple pain relief (e.g., paracetamol) for 1-2 days following a vaginal birth and 4-5 days following a caesarean birth
- Anti-inflammatory medications (eg. Diclofenac or ibuprofen) for 1-2 days following a vaginal birth and 2-4 days following a caesarean birth
- Opioid pain relief (e.g., tramadol, tapentadol or oxycodone) for 2-3 days following a caesarean birth

If you feel that your pain is the same over the following days and not decreasing please speak with your midwife, GP or obstetrician.

Mothersafe

MotherSafe is a free telephone service for the women of NSW, based at the Royal Hospital for Women, Randwick.

MotherSafe provides a comprehensive counselling service for women and their healthcare providers concerned about exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Phone: 02 9382 6539.

