

YOUR HEALTH

KETAMINE PATIENT INFORMATION



This leaflet is to provide you with information on ketamine: what it is, why we use it to treat pain, how you should take it and the possible side-effects.

What is ketamine?

Ketamine is a medicine that was first used as an anaesthetic, to put people to sleep during an operation. It has since been found to be helpful in reducing some types of pain, especially neuropathic (nerve) pain. While ketamine is not licensed to treat nerve pain, it has been used for many years by doctors who specialise in pain treatment for nerve pain.

Why have I been given ketamine for my pain?

Ketamine is used to help treat nerve pain, often in combination with other pain killers (such as morphine or morphine-type medications). It works by preventing pain 'messages' being sent to the brain along the spinal cord (like closing a gate). It does this by blocking a chemical pathway that transmits pain signals along the spinal cord itself.

Types of ketamine

Ketamine comes in two forms; a liquid that can be taken by mouth, and an injection. The injectable form can be given via a syringe driver (a portable pump) to provide a continuous infusion through a cannula (small plastic tube) under the skin.

Starting ketamine

Ketamine is usually started when you are in a place that specialises in pain control (such as the hospice). The best way to give you your ketamine will be decided upon by your palliative care / hospice specialist. If you take it by mouth, the starting dose is usually 10-20mg three to four times per day. If you are given it via a syringe driver, the starting dose is usually 100mg/day. The dose may be increased if needed. It may be given as a short course (1-2 weeks), or for a longer time, even indefinitely.

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When you first take ketamine, you will be monitored in the hospice, so that the dose can then be adjusted correctly (and quickly) and any side effects noted early. For some people, their pain will improve within hours of starting ketamine; for others this may take days or even weeks. Your dose of ketamine will be adjusted by the hospice team to find the correct dose for you. Once we know that ketamine works for your pain, and how much you need, you may continue to take it at home.

What are the possible side effects? What can be done about them?

The most common side effects are:

- Drowsiness / feeling 'drunk' (this often wears off within a few days)
- Vivid dreams or hallucinations (seeing or hearing something that is not really there)
- Increase in blood pressure or heart rate (your blood pressure and heart rate will be monitored when you start ketamine).

Rarer side effects:

Ketamine can cause problems with your urinary tract, leading to pain / stinging when passing urine, or blood in the urine. These symptoms are similar to urine infections but can lead to more serious problems if not recognised as being caused by ketamine.

Let your specialist palliative care team or general practitioner (GP) know if you experience any of these problems and remind them you are taking ketamine. Ketamine may also affect how your liver works. Your doctor will arrange regular blood tests to monitor this. If this does happen, your liver function normally recovers when ketamine is stopped.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who will prescribe my ketamine?

If you are in the hospice, one of the hospice specialists will prescribe your ketamine; when you go home, they will make sure you have two weeks' supply to take with you.

When you are at home, your GP or hospice clinician will prescribe the ketamine supply. Please bear in mind that it may take several days for the community pharmacist to have your prescription ready for you as they have to order the ketamine specially as it is a less commonly taken medication.

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Should I continue to take my other medications with ketamine?

Most medications can be continued alongside ketamine. However, if you are taking an 'opioid' painkiller (such as morphine, oxycodone or fentanyl), the dose of this will usually be reduced when you start ketamine. This is because ketamine can enhance the effects of these medications and you may not need the same amount. When you start ketamine, your clinician will tell you if any changes need to be made to your existing medications.

Can I drive while taking ketamine?

You may feel drowsy when first starting on ketamine or for a short while when the dose is increased. If you feel drowsier or have problems concentrating, do not drive until you feel better and until you have spoken to your clinician about it. If your clinician says it is okay to drive, follow these guidelines:

- a) Do not drive in the dark or bad conditions
- b) Do not drink any alcohol before driving
- c) Do not exhaust yourself by driving long distances

Can I drink alcohol?

Yes. It is quite safe to drink alcohol and take ketamine together BUT the combination can make you feel very sleepy or drunk much sooner than usual. It would be sensible to drink much less alcohol until you know what effect it has on you.

What about travel abroad?

You can travel abroad, but rules governing how much ketamine you can take with you vary according to the country you're visiting. Check with your hospice clinician and with the country you are planning to travel to, in plenty of time before you travel.

Can I stop the ketamine if my pain goes away?

If your pain disappears when taking ketamine, this may be due to the fact that it is doing its job. In this case, stopping ketamine suddenly may cause an increase in pain and other side-effects. Some people find that their pain responds well to just a week's treatment with ketamine. In this situation, your hospice clinician may decide to stop the ketamine.

If you would like to reduce your dose or stop taking ketamine, please discuss it with your hospice clinician so that a gradual reduction in your dose can be prescribed.

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Will I become addicted to ketamine?

No, there is no evidence that ketamine taken for pain causes addiction.

How / where should I keep my ketamine?

Keep it somewhere safe at home, out of reach of young children.

What if I forget to take a regular dose?

Talk to your hospice clinician. If it is more than an hour since the dose was due, it is best to wait until the next regular dose is due.

What if I get more pain when taking ketamine?

Talk to your hospice specialist. It may be that they need to adjust your dose of ketamine, or one of the other painkillers you are taking.

How will I know if I am taking too much ketamine?

Signs that may suggest you are taking too much ketamine include:

- Feeling sleepier than usual, confusion, vivid dreams, hallucinations, visual disturbance and nausea.

If you notice these - or any other unusual symptoms - tell your specialist palliative clinician.

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