Morphine for Pain Relief in Children

Morphine is a type of strong pain relief medicine called an opioid (say: OH-pee-oyd).

Children who are in severe pain are sometimes given morphine to relieve it. If the doctor has prescribed morphine for your child, you may have some concerns. This information discusses the use of morphine to relieve pain in children. If you need to know more, please feel free to discuss your concerns with your child's doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

Pain relief is important
Preventing pain is better than treating it. If a child is expected to have severe pain, pain that lasts over time, or constant pain, pain-relieving medicines should be used early. This way, pain is relieved before it gets too severe. For example, if a child is going to have surgery, pain relief is given right away because the recovery after the surgery will be painful.

Morphine works very well for pain relief, so it is often used in cases like these.

Common concerns about giving morphine to children

Safety
Morphine and other opioids are safe to give to children, even newborns. All hospitals have very strict procedures to make sure that the right amount of any drug is given. The size, age, and condition of a child are always taken into account when deciding the amount of morphine a child needs. These measures mean the chance of giving too much of a drug (overdose) is low.

Addiction
Some parents worry their child will become addicted to morphine. It is true that opioids can be addictive, but when they are prescribed for pain relief they are not addictive. This is because addiction is mostly a psychological dependence. In other words, it is a craving in the brain. When children are taking morphine for pain, the craving that drives addiction does not exist.

Side effects of morphine
Most side effects from morphine are not serious. Many can be prevented before a problem starts. Mild side effects include:

- Difficulty having bowel movements (constipation): Laxatives or stool softeners can prevent this.
- Nausea and vomiting: Medicines can be given to avoid these.
- Itchiness: Medicines are available to reduce itchiness.
- Children may also feel drowsy, want to pee a lot, and their moods may change.

Rarely, morphine can have more serious side effects. However, these can also be managed safely.

Most of the following side effects are not common, but they may be a sign of a serious problem. Call your doctor right away or take your child to the closest Emergency Department if your child has any of these side effects:

- dizziness
- fainting
- feeling extra sleepy
- having a hard time breathing
- slow and shallow breathing rate

Dependence and withdrawal
If a child takes morphine for a few weeks, he can develop dependence. Dependence means that the child's body has become used to having the medicine. When the medicine is no longer in the body, withdrawal can occur. Symptoms of withdrawal include nausea, shivering, and stomach pain.

To avoid symptoms of withdrawal, your child will slowly be given less morphine until he no longer takes the medicine.

Dependence is not the same thing as addiction, which is a psychological craving for a drug.

Other pain-relieving medicines
Morphine may be prescribed on its own or with other pain relievers such as acetaminophen and NSAIDs.

Morphine is a better choice than codeine
Codeine is also an opioid, but it is not as good as morphine for relieving pain. In most people, the body turns (metabolizes) codeine into morphine, and it is the morphine that relieves the pain. However, at least 1 in 10 people cannot metabolize codeine into morphine, so codeine does not work for them. For this reason, morphine is a better choice for pain relief than codeine.

For more information, talk to your child's nurse about pain medicines and other ways to relieve a child's pain.

Key points
- It is better to prevent pain than to treat it once it has started.
- Morphine is a safe and effective pain-relieving medicine, even for children and babies.
- The side effects of morphine are usually mild and can be prevented.
- Morphine provides more effective pain relief than codeine.
- For more information, speak to your child's doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.