

# medicineupdate

Asking the right questions about new medicines

---

## Tramadol for pain

	Page
Section 1: What tramadol is	1
Section 2: What tramadol is for	1
Section 3: Who can take tramadol	2
Section 4: What does tramadol do?	2
Section 5: Important side effects to consider	2
Section 6: How to reduce your risk of side effects	3
Section 7: Important interactions to consider	3
Section 8: What else you should know about tramadol	3
Section 9: How to decide between tramadol and other medicines	4
Section 10: What does tramadol cost?	5
Section 11: Other ways to help control pain	5
Where to find more information	Back page

*get to know your medicines*



National Prescribing Service Limited

NPS is an independent, non-profit organisation for Quality Use of Medicines, funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

## Summary

Tramadol is a painkiller prescribed by your doctor. In general, it should not be taken instead of paracetamol or aspirin without good reason, as it has more side effects.

There are many forms of tramadol. Some are newer than others. It is important that people taking tramadol know how often to take it. Some forms need to be taken every 4 to 8 hours, some are taken twice a day, and one form is taken only once a day. It is also important to take only one form of tramadol at a time — so check the active ingredient of all your pain medicines.

## 1. What tramadol is

The active ingredient of this medicine is **tramadol** (pronounced tram-a-dol).

Tramadol is available as tablets, capsules and liquid drops that are swallowed. This update talks about tablets and capsules. The liquid drops work in the same way and have the same side effects.

Several different forms of tramadol tablets and capsules are available (see table 1). Some forms are taken every 4 to 8 hours, some are taken twice a day, and one form is taken only once a day.

How long tramadol works for depends on the way the tablets or capsules release the medicine in the body (see table 1). Some brand names of tramadol will have an 'SR' or 'XR' after them. The SR stands for 'sustained release' and the XR stands for 'extended release'. The SR form of tramadol is long acting and the XR form is very long acting.

The active ingredient is the chemical in the medicine that makes the medicine work.

**Table 1: Different forms of tramadol\***

How often you take it	How long it lasts	Brand names
Every 4 to 8 hours	Short acting	Tramal Zydol Tramedo Tramadol
Every 12 hours (twice a day)	Long acting	Tramal SR Tramahexal SR Tramedo SR Zydol SR
Every 24 hours (once a day)	Very long acting	Durotram XR

\* Make sure you take only one form of tramadol at a time.

## 2. What tramadol is for

Tramadol is taken to help relieve pain. It can be taken on its own, but is more commonly taken in addition to paracetamol. Tramadol must be prescribed by your doctor.

---

### 3. Who can take tramadol

You can take tramadol if your pain is not effectively treated by paracetamol or aspirin, or if these medicines are unsuitable for you.

You can take tramadol while continuing to take paracetamol or aspirin.

You should not take tramadol if you:

- have epilepsy (fits or seizures) that are not well controlled by your epilepsy medicine
- are breastfeeding
- have severe liver or kidney disease
- are taking a type of antidepressant known as an MAOI or MAO inhibitor, e.g. moclobemide (Aurorix), phenelzine (Nardil) or tranylcypromine (Parnate).

If you take any other medicine for depression, check with your doctor before taking any form of tramadol.

**Ask your doctor about all of the treatment options for your pain.**

---

### 4. What does tramadol do?

Tramadol works in two ways to relieve pain.

It works on the brain in a similar way to codeine and morphine.

It also affects some other chemicals in the brain called noradrenaline and serotonin. These have many functions, some of which include easing pain.

---

### 5. Important side effects to consider

All medicines can have side effects. Sometimes, the side effects are serious but most of the time they are not.

Common side effects of tramadol include dizziness, nausea, constipation and drowsiness. Dizziness and drowsiness may affect your ability to drive a car safely, so see how tramadol affects you before drive.

Tramadol can slightly increase your chances of having a fit or seizure. This is particularly true for people who are at risk of having a fit because they have epilepsy, have had a head injury or have had an infection of the brain such as meningitis. Talk to your doctor if you think this might affect you.

**For a list of possible side effects, see the consumer medicine information leaflet for the type of tramadol you are taking.**

**Ask your doctor about the possible side effects of this medicine before you use it.**

**Always tell your doctor about any changes to your condition if you are taking a new medicine.**

**You can also discuss side effects with a pharmacist, by calling the Adverse Medicine Events Line (see back page).**

---

**6.**  
**How to reduce  
your risk of  
side effects**

It is very important to know how often and how many of your tramadol capsules or tablets to take. With so many different forms and strengths of tramadol, it is easy to take the wrong form of the medicine, or to take two different forms without realising they are both tramadol.

It is also important to follow the instructions about how to take tramadol. Some forms of tramadol must be swallowed whole to reduce the risk of side effects.

Tramadol can cause constipation. Drinking plenty of water, being more active and increasing the amount of fibre in your diet can help reduce the chances of being constipated.

**Check the active ingredients of all your pain medicines to make sure you are not doubling up on any.**

---

**7.**  
**Important  
interactions  
to consider**

Tramadol interacts with several other medicines. In particular, it interacts with many antidepressants, and with St John's wort and warfarin.

Tell your doctor about all the medicines you take, including any natural and herbal medicines.

**An interaction occurs when something affects how a medicine works. The interaction may be with a food, or another medicine, or a herbal remedy, or food supplement.**

**Some interactions can affect how well medicines work. This might increase the chances of side effects.**

**Your doctor should always know ALL the medicines you take, including any natural or herbal medicines.**

---

**8.**  
**What else you  
should know  
about tramadol**

You should not drink alcohol if you are taking tramadol, as it can make you very drowsy.

---

**9.**  
**How to decide  
between tramadol  
and other medicines**

The painkiller you use will depend on the type of pain you have, the cause of the pain and the severity of the pain, among other things.

It will also depend to some extent on the side effects of different painkillers.

**Paracetamol**

Paracetamol (e.g. Panadol, Dymadon) is the most appropriate painkiller for many people. It relieves pain with few side effects when it is used at the right dose. If you can manage your pain with paracetamol, there is no need to try other painkillers.

Other painkillers include non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and medicines like codeine and morphine.

**Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs**

NSAIDs such as ibuprofen (e.g. Nurofen) and diclofenac (e.g. Voltaren) are available from your pharmacist without a prescription. Some NSAIDs are only available with a prescription. In general, NSAIDs are more likely than paracetamol to cause side effects, especially if they are taken for more than a few days. This is especially true for older people. NSAIDs can sometimes cause serious side effects like stomach bleeding, and can increase the risk of heart conditions in some people. NSAIDs are more likely to cause side effects when they are taken at higher doses for more than a few days.

**Codeine, morphine and oxycodone**

Medicines like codeine, morphine and oxycodone all belong to the same family as tramadol. They are more likely to cause side effects than paracetamol, but are necessary for some kinds of pain.

These medicines all work in a similar way, but morphine and oxycodone are stronger than codeine and tramadol. They share many side effects, such as drowsiness, constipation and nausea.

**Tramadol**

Tramadol has some side effects and interactions that most other members of the family don't have. For example, it should be avoided by people taking certain types of antidepressants.

Tramadol often isn't suitable for people because it makes them feel sick, because they have other conditions, or because they are taking other medicines that mean they can't take tramadol.

Some people find that tramadol relieves their pain and that its side effects are acceptable.

There are other choices of painkillers that work as well as, or better than, tramadol. It may be that you have to try several different painkillers to see which one is best for you. The decision might involve balancing the pain relief against the side effects of the medicine.

It is possible to combine some painkillers — but you should discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist before doing so.

**Remember that risks  
and benefits differ  
between medicines and  
from person to person.**

---

**10.**  
**What does tramadol cost?**

Most forms of tramadol are available through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), but only under certain conditions. Your doctor must certify that paracetamol and/or aspirin have not eased your pain or are not appropriate for you.

If you have a concession card, you will pay \$5.00 for a prescription through the PBS.

If you don't have a concession card, you will pay between \$10.00 and \$30.00 per prescription, depending on what form and brand of tramadol you are prescribed.

For some forms of tramadol, your doctor may need to make a phone call before they can prescribe more than 10 days supply.

**Most medicines prescribed by your doctor are covered by the PBS. This means that the Australian Government pays part of the cost of your medicine.**

**You will need to pay the full price if the medicine is not available on the PBS, or is not available on the PBS for your specific condition.**

---

**11.**  
**Other ways to help control pain**

Dealing with pain involves several steps.

**Understanding the cause of the pain**

Sometimes, the cause of the pain (such as an abscess) can be treated, and sometimes it is clear that the pain, such as pain caused by a bee sting, will settle down with time and care.

**Recognising the difference between short and long-term pain**

Short-term pain might be caused by something like a sprained ankle or having a tooth removed at the dentist.

Long-term pain, which lasts for more than a few months, might be caused by things like arthritis or back pain.

If you have pain for more than a couple of days, you should speak to your doctor.

**Relieving pain in other ways**

Whether the pain is short-term or long-term, there are other things you can do to help ease the pain.

For example, in short-term pain, resting the affected part and putting an ice pack on it can often help.

In long-term pain, it is particularly important to look at other ways to help ease the pain and to avoid the things that can make it worse, so the pain does not stop you doing the things you enjoy. Being active, eating healthily and managing stress are some of the things that can help. If you have long-term pain, your doctor can help you to find ways to help manage your pain and the effect it has on your life. It's also important that you try to look after the pain yourself — you will know, more than anyone, what helps and what doesn't.

---

... continued

## 11.

### Other ways to help control pain

For example, research is gradually showing the importance of sleep for people with chronic pain. In general, people who sleep well have less pain than those who don't sleep so well. Getting a good night's sleep is a vital part of dealing with long-term pain.

So, too, are diet and exercise. Long-term pain is generally less of a problem for people who can exercise regularly, in a manageable way, and who can maintain a healthy body weight.

Other techniques that have been shown to reduce long-term pain in certain circumstances include:

- acupuncture
- creams and gels
- heat and cold
- self-hypnosis
- laughter
- massage
- psychological techniques such as stress management training, cognitive behaviour therapy and others
- relaxation
- rest.

Specialist pain management clinics are also available in some parts of Australia for people whose chronic pain is not controlled by the usual methods. You would need to be referred by your doctor.

---

# Where to find out more information

## To find out more about this medicine

- Call the Medicines Line on 1300 888 763 to speak to a pharmacist (Mon–Fri, 9am–6pm EST for the cost of a local call, mobile calls more).
- Read the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet for this medicine.

The CMI will tell you:

- who should not take the medicine
- which medicines should not be taken at the same time (drug interactions)
- how to take the medicine
- most possible side effects
- the ingredients.

You can get the CMI leaflet for tramadol from:

- your doctor or pharmacist
- [www.nps.org.au/consumers](http://www.nps.org.au/consumers)
- the company distributing the brand you are using.

## To report a side effect with tramadol

Call the Adverse Medicine Events (AME) Line on 1300 134 237 (Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm EST — excluding national public holidays).

The AME Line lets you report and discuss side effects that might be related to your medicine. The side effects of your medicine — but not your personal details — are reported to the Australian medicines regulatory agency (the Therapeutic Goods Administration or TGA for short). The information helps to improve the safe use of medicines.

For more information about the AME Line visit [www.nps.org.au/ame\\_line](http://www.nps.org.au/ame_line).

## More about taking medicines:

- How new medicines are tested and approved in Australia see NPS fact sheet 'New medicines: are they always better?' at [www.nps.org.au/factsheets](http://www.nps.org.au/factsheets).
- Side effects: more information on understanding side effects is available from [www.asmi.com.au](http://www.asmi.com.au).

---

## What is *Medicine Update*?

*Medicine Update* lets you know about new drugs and new PBS listings. When medicines are new, we know less about their expected benefits and possible harms than we do for older medicines. It's important to understand what evidence is available about both benefits and harms. *Medicine Update* provides balanced information to help you decide if a medicine is right for you.

## How to use *Medicine Update*

*Medicine Update* is a tool you can use to help understand your treatment choices and to discuss them with your doctor. *Medicine Update* doesn't describe all possible side effects or precautions, and you should always read the consumer medicine information (see above).

## Who wrote *Medicine Update*?

National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS), an independent, non-profit, government-funded organisation, wrote this information in consultation with consumers and health professionals.

Date published: December 2008

Visit the NPS website to find out about our free activities and resources for consumers [www.nps.org.au/consumers](http://www.nps.org.au/consumers)



National Prescribing Service Limited

ABN 61 082 034 393 | Level 7/418A Elizabeth Street Surry Hills NSW 2010 | PO Box 1147 Strawberry Hills NSW 2012  
Phone: 02 8217 8700 | Fax: 02 9211 7578 | email: [info@nps.org.au](mailto:info@nps.org.au) | web: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS) is an independent, non-profit organisation for Quality Use of Medicines, funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

This review was conducted by the National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS) in consultation with consumers and health professionals.