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What Is Methadone?

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Methadone is part of a category called opioids. It was created by German doctors during World War II. When it arrived in the United States, it was used to treat people with extreme pain. Today, your doctor may use it as part of your treatment for an addiction to heroin or narcotic painkillers.

It works a lot like morphine does. You can take it as a tablet, a powder, or a liquid. It must be prescribed by a doctor. People who take it illegally often inject it, which exposes them to diseases like HIV.

Even though it's safer than some other narcotics, your doctor should keep a close watch on you while you take methadone. Taking it can lead to addiction or abuse.

What Does It Do?

Methadone changes the way your brain and nervous system respond to pain so that you feel relief. Its effects are slower than those of other strong painkillers like morphine. It blocks the high you get from drugs like codeine, heroin, hydrocodone, morphine, and oxycodone.

Your doctor may prescribe methadone if you're in a lot of pain from an injury, surgery, or chronic illness.

It can also help if you're in treatment for addiction to other opioids. It can give a similar feeling and prevent withdrawal symptoms. You may hear this called replacement therapy. Methadone replaces the opioids in your system with milder effects.

It's usually used as one part of your treatment plan. It isn't a cure for addiction.

Uses and Side Effects

While there's no set amount of time you'll take methadone to treat an addiction, experts say it should be at least a year, and maybe more than that. The doctor will carefully track your body's response to it and adjust your treatment. When it's time to stop taking it, he'll help you stop slowly to prevent withdrawal.

With short-term use, you may notice:

- Restlessness
- Nausea or vomiting
- Slow breathing
- Itchy skin