



# What is opioid substitution treatment?

Information on OST for whānau and support people



National Association  
Opioid Treatment  
Providers

[tepou.co.nz](http://tepou.co.nz)

Kia ora, Talofa lava, Malo e lelei,  
Kia orana, Taloha ni, Fakaalofa  
lahi atu, Bula vinaka, Ni hao,  
Namaste

We know it can be really difficult and stressful watching loved ones go through difficult times as a result of their substance use, and we also know that this will have an impact on you. This information booklet is here to help shed some light on OST so you can feel well supported to understand this treatment option.

## **OST is an opportunity for positive change**

Whānau and friends of people who are engaged in opioid substitution treatment (OST) may feel unsure of what this means for them and their friend or whānau member.

If the person you care about is receiving, or has just started on OST this is an opportunity for them to make positive changes. OST helps people to stop illicit or illegal opioids and helps with cravings and withdrawals. They can feel much more stable, able to cope with everyday living and focus on the future.

OST is a harm reduction option for people who experience difficulties using opioids purchased or prescribed (for example, morphine, codeine, tramadol, oxycodone, or heroin). We know that it is very difficult to cut down or 'just say no' to drugs, if a person has become dependent on them.

You may have seen your friend or whānau member struggle with trying to give up their substance use, and witnessed them experiencing distressing withdrawal symptoms when they do try to stop.

OST is a harm reduction approach that supports people to reduce harms from substance use, including health, social, or legal harms. Recovery is an individual journey. It can be about reaching wellbeing through stability and is not always about stopping substance use.

## **What is OST exactly?**

In Aotearoa New Zealand there are two main medications that can be prescribed for opioid substitution. Both need to be prescribed within a specialised OST service or by a GP who is authorised by the OST service. People attend a community pharmacy to consume their medication and will sometimes get ‘takeaway’ doses to consume at home. In addition, counselling or therapy may also be offered as part of OST treatment.

You may have heard of methadone. Methadone comes in liquid form and is usually clear like water, though in some parts of New Zealand colour is added. The other option in New Zealand is buprenorphine with naloxone which is a newer medication that is dissolved in the person’s mouth. Both have been researched extensively and have proven safe and effective for treating opioid dependence.

Both methadone and buprenorphine are very strong opioid medications and there is an increased risk of overdose (particularly

with methadone) when they are first prescribed, especially if the person is using other substances such as benzodiazepines, alcohol, and other opioids. All OST medication that is stored at home should be kept in a secure place away from children.

**If a child consumes any amount of these medications it could be fatal. They will require immediate medical attention and an ambulance should be called.**

## More about OST

OST can be used short term or longer term, though research shows long term treatment is likely to produce better outcomes, especially when combined with psychosocial interventions. The length of time someone is on OST treatment should largely be up to them and is likely to depend on their needs.

Their OST case manager and doctor will discuss recovery goals with your friend or whānau member and work with them to establish the best treatment options. You may also want to be involved in their care and learn how you can support them while they are on OST. You should be made welcome if you are invited to attend any appointments by your friend or whānau member.

When your friend or whānau member has achieved their treatment goals and attained a level of personal stability they will have a good chance of achieving abstinence from all opioids, if that is their goal.

If your friend or whānau member reaches a point where they feel ready, their OST treatment provider will discuss the process of coming off OST and work with them to achieve this.

## **How does OST affect day-to-day life for my friend or whānau member?**

OST does place constraints on people's lives. For example, people need to provide several days notice if they want to go away or leave the area so it may not always be easy for your friend or whānau member to take part in family activities even though they may want to. These constraints while on OST may have to come before other things, for the sake of your loved one's health and wellbeing. Your friend or whānau member may also need to avoid people and places associated with their use of substances.

If you are not involved with your friend or whānau member's OST treatment in any way, this may be difficult. However, you can find out more about OST from the Helpful resources section of this brochure, and from the local OST service.

## **OST and pregnancy**

Pregnant people who are dependent on opioids are encouraged to begin OST as early as possible in their pregnancy as this is much safer than continuing to use non-prescribed opioids.

Methadone is currently the preferred medication for pregnant people as it has been proven to be safe for pregnant and breastfeeding people, and their baby.

People prescribed buprenorphine who become pregnant will decide with their OST service which is the best OST medication to take for them and their baby.

## **Understanding addiction**

If you have not had the experience of addiction yourself it can be really difficult to understand how and why people become addicted to substances that seem to become the most important thing in their lives. We don't have all the answers about why some people develop problems with substance use, and others don't.

Things like traumatic events, environment, mental distress, how they handle stress, genetics and changes to the brain with the use of substances can influence why some people become addicted to substances.

What we do know is that addiction affects all sorts of people from all walks of life. We know it is not a choice or a moral failing. While people can find it very difficult to get out of the cycle of addiction, we also know that OST and other interventions can help.

## **Naloxone**

Naloxone is a medicine that can quickly reverse an opioid overdose. Opioids (like morphine, heroin or nitazenes) can slow down and even stop your heart or breathing. Naloxone halts these effects and can save a life.

If your friends or whānau are taking opioids, it's a good idea to have naloxone on hand – and make sure you and the people around them know how to use it.

See the Helpful resources section for more information and where to get a naloxone kit.

## **Be sure to look after yourself too**

Many whānau and support people ask themselves if something they have done has caused problematic substance use, and will commonly experience guilt. It is vital to remember that addiction is a very complex phenomenon and it is unlikely that anything you have done has caused the addiction related harms the person is experiencing.

Also remember that they are responsible for their own behaviour change, for example, choosing to try OST or other interventions.

Statistics show that people who struggle with problematic substance use are more likely to make positive change if those closest to them are also receiving support and information.

**Seeking support for yourself and acquiring knowledge and information about addiction issues can not only help you, but may impact positively on the person you are concerned about.**

Remember, your own needs and wellbeing are important. You must take care of yourself and others in the whānau who may be finding this situation difficult and stressful.

If you require some help and care for yourself and your whānau in supporting someone on OST, here are resources that can offer help and more information.

You may also find local services by enquiring with your local Community Alcohol and Drug Service (CADS) attached to Health New Zealand. Their number can be found online or in your local phone book.

## Helpful resources

### **OST and you: A guide to opioid substitution therapy**

[www.tepou.co.nz/resources/ost-and-you-a-guide-to-opioid-substitution-treatment-2025](http://www.tepou.co.nz/resources/ost-and-you-a-guide-to-opioid-substitution-treatment-2025)

**Not My Family, Never My Child** by **Tony Trimingham**, available from [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

### **Alcohol Drug Helpline**

0800 787 797

### **Kina Families and Addictions Trust**

[www.kina.org.nz](http://www.kina.org.nz)

### **The Level**

<https://thelevel.org.nz>

### **Family Drug Support New Zealand**

<https://www.fds.org.nz/>

### **What is naloxone and where to get it**

<https://thelevel.org.nz/news-and-stories/where-to-get-naloxone>