**Updated information on the use of opioids in New Zealand**

The Health Quality & Safety Commission has updated information on the use of opioids in its latest [Atlas of Healthcare Variation](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz/atlas/opioids) online tool. The Atlas shows differences in the type and quality of health care people receive in different district health board (DHB) regions.

Opioids are a type of medicine used to treat pain. They are used a lot in hospital and in the community to help ease people’s pain but they can also cause harm. These harms include effects on brain function (cognition), breathing issues, sleep problems, constipation, depression, nausea and an increased risk of falls, among others.

Opioid medicines are also linked to tolerance and dependence, which stops patients from getting the right kind of pain relief from them in the long term.

Of interest in this updated information:

* The number of people in the community given a more potent (strong) opioid at least once in a year has gone up, from 63,000 people in 2011 to 80,000 people in 2019.
* There was a lot of difference between DHBs in the number of people given opioids. For example, some DHBs gave more people opioids than others, and sometimes up to twice as much.

**About the opioids Atlas domain**

The section on opioids (called a ‘domain’) in the Atlas of Healthcare Variation includes information about:

* how common opioid prescribing is
* whether certain groups of people are more likely to be prescribed opioids than others
* what kind of opioid medicines are used
* treatment comparisons; for example, how many people are prescribed certain opioid medicines compared with others.

Doctors can use the information in the Atlas to improve the health of patients living with short- and long-term pain.

*You don’t need to do anything because of this update. But if you are taking opioid medication to manage pain and are concerned about it or would like to understand more about it, please contact your GP.*

**More information:**

Health Navigator has more information on [pain](http://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/p/pain/) and [pain relief medication](http://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/medicines/p/pain-relief-medications/).