

DEPOT BUPRENORPHINE: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is buprenorphine (“bupe”) treatment?

Buprenorphine is an opioid medication offered on the Opioid Treatment Program (OTP). The OTP is a ‘maintenance’ program to treat opioid dependency. People on OTP take a regular, stable dose of opioid medication, which can reduce cravings for non-prescribed opioids. Buprenorphine can also block the effects of other opioids, which can help you control your use.

What is depot bupe?

Depot bupe is a new way to take buprenorphine on the OTP. Until recently, there were 2 buprenorphine products available - Subutex and Suboxone. These are both taken sublingually (under the tongue) every 1 to 3 days. Now, there are 2 new buprenorphine options available on the OTP in NSW - Buvidal and Sublocade. These products are known as ‘depot’ or ‘long-acting injectable’ buprenorphine. Unlike Suboxone, these products don’t contain naloxone.

Both Buvidal and Sublocade are given as subcutaneous (under the skin) injections, and turn in a ‘depot’ in your body that slowly releases the bupe. You don’t need either product removed before your next injection; your body absorbs the entire dose. There are some differences - Buvidal is administered either weekly or monthly, while Sublocade is a monthly product only. Buvidal is injected in one of four sites - stomach, upper arm, thigh and buttock. Sublocade is always injected into a site in the stomach area.

How is depot bupe different?

Depot bupe products are much longer-acting than other OTP meds. Depending on which formulation you’re prescribed, you may only need to go to the clinic for your weekly or monthly injections. Some people will need to go in more often, for case management or other support in between injections. The main difference between depot bupe and other OTP medications is that, for the first time ever, you won’t have to dose every day, negotiate takeaways, or worry about somebody accidentally taking some of your medicine.

Is depot bupe the same as the Naltrexone implants that were supposed to be the next big thing in drug treatment?

No! Some people confuse depot bupe with the naltrexone implant, a product that is claimed to "cure" dependency on drugs. In naltrexone treatment, people are first rapidly detoxed using naloxone, and then implanted with a device containing up to 6 months of a drug called naltrexone, which blocks the effects of opioids.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has not approved naltrexone implants for use in Australia, and there are significant concerns about the safety of Naltrexone implant treatment. Don't believe the hype: there is no such thing as a quick fix or "silver bullet" for opioid dependence.

Is depot bupe an approved medication?

Depot bupe is just another way of taking buprenorphine, which has been available in Australia for around 15 years on the OTP. Over 60 years of evidence has shown that the OTP can help people reduce or stop their use of illicit opioids and improve their lives and well-being in many ways.

Buvidal and Sublocade have been tested through research projects, including clinical trials in Australia. They have both been approved by the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). Additionally, Buvidal and Sublocade are provided free by the government to OTP patients - although private clinics may charge a fee to cover administration, storage and handling.

How do I know if depot bupe is right for me?

There are pros and cons to each of the OTP medications - look into each one, ask people who have tried them, ask your GP, google them, and make a comparison. Talk to your OTP team to find out more - both nurses and prescribers can give you more information. Even if you aren't on the OTP, you can make an appointment with a prescriber to get some advice. You can also get consumer info booklets by calling the Opioid Treatment Line (OTL) on 1800 642 248 (office hours).

In the end, you are in control of your treatment. You should never be forced into a particular treatment or told you will only get a place on the OTP if you choose a particular medication. Make a complaint to the OTL if this happens to you.

What are some of the benefits of being on depot bupe?

Depot bupe will be a great option for many people, especially those who live in regional and rural areas or have trouble getting to a clinic every day for whatever reason (e.g. work, transport issues, family commitments). Some of the people we spoke to from the trials felt they were exposed to less stigma and discrimination as their clinic visits were less frequent. They also felt more anonymous and more secure.

Some of the people who were on the depot buprenorphine trials in NSW stressed how glad they were not to be talking and thinking about drugs every day, as was the case when dosing at a clinic multiple times a week. Overall, most people have been satisfied with depot bupe as an OTP product, and some people even reported finding themselves sleeping better and feeling less depressed.

What are some of the problems?

Some of the concerns people shared with us about depot bupe were:

- losing control over how they managed their dosing and takeaways;
- what would happen if they had a bad reaction to the new products;
- having less regular contact with their clinic and being unsupported when they needed help with things like housing or legal matters.

Others wanted to use illicit opioids sometimes and were worried depot bupe was only for people focused on abstinence. However, while some people who trialled depot bupe said they felt nothing when they used, others said they did get a result. It appears to depend on metabolism, bupe dose and when in the month using was attempted.

A major concern was the unknowns around coming off depot bupe. Depot bupe products can hold you for much longer than other OTP meds because they last in your system a long time. People that we talked to who had come off it said they didn't experience withdrawal symptoms - even up to 2 years after their last dose!

Right now, no one is exactly sure what withdrawals from depot bupe will be like, how long it will take for them to kick in, or whether you will experience any withdrawal symptoms at all. We also don't know how severe or long-lasting they will be.

How do I start on depot bupe and where can I get it?

Talk to your current prescriber about your options if you are on the OTP already and want to move across to depot bupe. If you are not yet on the program, you can find a clinic by calling the Opioid Treatment Line (OTL) on 1800 642 248 (office hours).

If you're already prescribed Suboxone or Subutex, it's easy to swap directly over to Buvidal or Sublocade because these products all have buprenorphine as the active ingredient. If you're on methadone, you'll have to swap over to Suboxone/Subutex first for at least a week before moving onto depot bupe. If you aren't on OTP and are only taking short-acting opioids (e.g. heroin/morphine/oxycodone), you can start treatment with Buvidal, or with Suboxone/Subutex first before moving onto a depot product later.

There are various dose strengths, so you and your prescriber will need to work out the best dose for you. If you find that you are not being 'held' by your dose, you can get a 'booster' dose before your next injection is due. It can take a few months to stabilise on depot bupe.

Depot buprenorphine is only available at services with the facilities to store and inject the medication. You have to be injected by a doctor or nurse - you can't fill the prescription and inject it yourself.

About this resource

This info guide was prepared by the NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA) with support from the NSW Ministry of Health. NUAA advocates for the health, human rights, and dignity of people who use drugs in NSW. For more information about NUAA, treatment options, or how to reduce the harms associated with using drugs, visit us at:

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