

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

Buprenorphine Now Available for Treating Heroin Dependence in U.S.

What is buprenorphine? Buprenorphine is an opiate used for the treatment of opiate dependence. It is the active ingredient in the prescription medications Subutex® and Suboxone®. Subutex®, which contains only buprenorphine, is intended for use at the beginning of treatment. Suboxone® contains both buprenorphine and naloxone (to decrease the potential for abuse by injection) and is used in the maintenance treatment of opiate addiction.

How is buprenorphine used? Both Subutex® and Suboxone® are tablets that are placed under the tongue and dissolved. Buprenorphine abusers either inject the drug intravenously or chew or swallow the tablets.

What are the effects of buprenorphine use? The most common reported side effects of the drug include cold or flu-like symptoms, headaches, sweating, sleeping difficulties, nausea, and mood swings. Buprenorphine has been associated with breathing difficulty, especially when combined with depressants. Misuse of the drug by using it with other drugs (e.g., benzodiazepines, depressants), by injecting it, or by taking large oral doses can be lethal.

How effective is buprenorphine in treating opiate dependence? Studies have shown that buprenorphine is more effective than a placebo and is equally as effective as moderate doses of methadone and LAAM in opioid maintenance therapy. A Swedish study published earlier this year reports that 75% of opiate-dependent patients receiving buprenorphine treatment were still in treatment after one year, compared to 0% of those receiving a placebo.

What is the abuse potential of buprenorphine? Buprenorphine can be abused, both by individuals who are and who are not dependent on opioids. A recent study in France (where buprenorphine has been prescribed since 1996) found that 47% of patients on buprenorphine maintenance treatment reported ever injecting the drug. The addition of naloxone decreases the likelihood of abuse because naloxone blocks the desired “high” abusers seek when injecting buprenorphine and can cause severe withdrawal symptoms.

How is buprenorphine obtained? Subutex® and Suboxone® are the first narcotic drugs used for the treatment of opiate dependence that can be prescribed in an office setting. A list of physicians currently qualified to prescribe these drugs under the Drug Addiction Treatment Act of 2000 (DATA 2000) is available online (http://buprenorphine.samhsa.gov/bwns_locator/index.html).

What is the legal status of buprenorphine? In 2002 the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) reclassified buprenorphine from a Schedule V to a Schedule III narcotic based on a re-evaluation of evidence regarding the potential for abuse, diversion, dependence, and side effects.

SOURCE: A complete list of sources is available on the CESAR website (<http://www.cesar.umd.edu/cesar/cesarfax.asp>). For more information on buprenorphine, visit <http://www.buprenorphine.samhsa.gov> and http://www.fda.gov/cder/drug/infopage/subutex_suboxone/default.htm.

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