

Ketamine for Pain Relief in Palliative Care

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Prepared by: Palliative Care Network
and IPPL Palliative Care Team
Designed and Managed by: Library Services

WD85-2657 © August 2026 Nova Scotia Health Authority
To be reviewed August 2029 or sooner, if needed.
Learn more:
<https://library.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources>

Ketamine for Pain Relief in Palliative Care

What is ketamine?

- Ketamine is an aesthetic medication commonly used during surgery to stop you from feeling pain.
- If you have pain that is not helped by other treatments, small doses (amounts) of ketamine may help.

How does this medication work?

- Ketamine blocks pain signals travelling from your body to your brain. This can lower how much pain you feel.

Why do I need this medication?

- Other treatments have not helped your pain and your health care provider has decided that ketamine may help.

How do I take this medication?

- Ketamine comes as a liquid. It is taken orally (by mouth).

Call your health care team if you are:

- › Confused or agitated (upset)
- › Hallucinating or having bad dreams
- › Dizzy or have a bad headache
- › Not getting any pain relief
- › Not fully aware or awake
- › Breathing slower than usual (10 breaths a minute or less)
- › Vomiting or have nausea
- › Having changes in your vision (seeing) (like blurred vision, double vision, or **nystagmus** [fast eye movements that you cannot control])
- › Drooling
- › Having muscle twitches
- › Having pain when peeing

If you have any questions or concerns:

- Call your local palliative care team:

› _____

Care at home

- Your support person or caregiver may be taught to:
 - › Count your breathing
 - › Check for signs of **sedation**
- **It is important to know the difference between drowsiness and sedation.**

Drowsiness

- › You have a normal tired feeling
- › You easily wake up
- › You can stay awake if needed

Sedation

- › You are hard to wake up
- › You fall asleep again fast
- › You are not fully aware

- **If your support person or caregiver thinks you are sedated**, they should call your local palliative care team:

› _____

How do I store this medication?

- Store ketamine at room temperature.
- Keep it out of the reach of children and pets.

- If you find that it tastes bitter, mix it with juice right before you take it.
- You will start on a low dose. This helps to:
 - › Lower side effects
 - › Let your body adjust to the medication
 - › Check if your pain is getting better
- Your dose may be changed over time. It may take time to find the dose that is right for you.
- Use an oral syringe to measure your dose.

Important: check your prescription carefully.

- › mg = milligrams
- › ml = milliliters
- Example: 10 mg may equal 1 ml.

- Vomiting (throwing up) is **not** a common side effect of this medication. You may have nausea (upset stomach) or vomit from your illness or from other treatments.
 - › If you vomit within 30 minutes of taking a dose, take the dose again when you feel better.

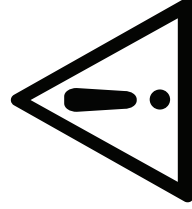
What if I miss a dose?

- Take the missed dose as soon as you remember.

- If it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and take your next scheduled dose.
- **Never take 2 doses at the same time.**
- **If you miss more than one (1) dose in 24 hours (1 day),** call your health care team.
- **Do not** stop taking this medication suddenly. Talk to your health care team first to stop this medication safely.

Warnings:

- **Do not** drive until you know how this medication affects you.
- **Do not** take this medication with other medications that cause drowsiness (like Benadryl[®], Gravol[™]).
- Avoid grapefruit and grapefruit juice. They can increase the effect of ketamine.
- Avoid alcohol or only drink small amounts. Alcohol can make the sedating effect (see page 5) of this medication stronger.
- Tell your health care team if there are any changes in your heart rate or blood pressure.



How quickly will it help?

- Each person is different.
- Some people feel relief within hours. For others, it may take longer.
- For some people, it may not help at all.

What are the possible side effects?

- Each person is different. Some people may not have any side effects.

Common side effects:

- › Sleepiness or fatigue (feeling very tired)
- › Feeling “far away” or like you are not real
- These side effects may go away as your body gets used to the medication.

Other possible side effects:

- › Mood changes
- › Bad dreams
- › Hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not real)
- › More drowsiness