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## Managing your pain effectively using “Over the Counter” (OTC) Medicines

Sometimes we need to ask a doctor or pharmacist for help to manage our pain. There are a range of pain relief medicines that can be bought without prescription as over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers.

### Short-term (acute) pain relief

Most of us have had occasional headaches, muscle or joint pain, or period pain. Short-term pain can be treated by pain relievers that can be bought OTC either from a pharmacy or other shop, such as a supermarket or corner shop.

### Long-term pain relief

Long-term pain, sometimes called chronic or persistent pain, is present everyday or comes and goes. Some people with long-term illnesses such as arthritis may need to take pain relievers everyday to manage this.

You may find it helpful to read information from these two websites:

[www.painaustralia.org.au](http://www.painaustralia.org.au)

<http://www.chronicpainaustralia.org.au/>

**WARNING: Many OTC medicines have more than one name and some contain more than one pain reliever. Always read the instructions and information in the leaflet and pack and make sure you don't take more than one medicine containing these ingredients**

A brand name is the name chosen by a manufacturer (e.g. Panadol®, Nurofen®, Voltaren®, Naprosyn®). Each drug may have several different brand names. The “active ingredient” (generic name), describes the drug (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen, diclofenac and naproxen). Make sure you know the ingredients of the products that you are taking. These will be clearly marked on the pack.

### Safe use of pain relievers

- When taken at the right dose, OTC analgesics are safe and effective medicines.
- When you have short-term pain it may be best to take the medication as recommended on the pack to stop the pain from building up and becoming intolerable.
- If you need to take analgesics for longer than three days you should see your doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- If you feel the dose of a prescription medicine isn't enough, don't 'top up' with analgesics bought over the counter - talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

### Manage your pain effectively and safely with OTC medicines

- If you have conditions like asthma, acid reflux or stomach ulcers or if you are taking certain medicines some OTC pain relievers may not be suitable for you. Always speak with your pharmacist or doctor about which pain reliever is best for you.
- Pain relievers containing codeine should only be used for the short-term treatment of acute, moderate pain that is not relieved by paracetamol, ibuprofen, naproxen, diclofenac, or aspirin alone.

- Codeine products result in constipation – it is important to drink fluids, increase the fibre in your diet and take medication to help you go to the toilet
- Some people may have side effects when taking medicines. You can help to make sure that medicines remain as safe as possible by reporting any unwanted side effects via the internet at or through your pharmacy.

### **Understand what you are taking**

- Keeping a pain and medicine diary can ensure that you are using your analgesic most effectively.
- Never take analgesics more frequently than it says on the instructions on the pack or in the leaflet.
- Never take someone else's pain medicines
- Always read the names of the ingredients and information on the leaflet and pack.
- Never take another product sooner than you should.

Your pharmacist can advise you on an appropriate choice of product.

### **Have you tried managing your pain without taking medicine? You could try:**

- Hot and cold packs
- Cooling sprays, creams, ointments or gels to help reduce swelling and inflammation.
- Supportive bandages for sprains and strains
- Acupuncture or Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) are alternatives to medication for pain control.
- Stretching and exercises.

If your pain persists for more than three days, or if you have other symptoms such as fever, neck stiffness, bleeding, rash or nausea and vomiting, always seek medical advice.

### **What kinds of pain can be helped by OTC medicines?**

- Headache
- Migraine
- Toothache
- Period pain
- Minor injuries eg) Strains and sprains
- Backache, Muscle aches and Joint pains.

### **How do different pain relievers work?**

Aspirin, ibuprofen, diclofenac and naproxen come from a group of drugs called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). These medications alter the body's response to pain and swelling.

Codeine is similar to, but weaker than morphine, and works by blocking pain messages in the brain and spinal cord. Paracetamol works in a different way to NSAIDs and codeine and is particularly helpful in reducing fever and pain. It is important to understand that there are some OTC medicines that contain more than one type of pain reliever. For example aspirin, paracetamol or ibuprofen can be combined with codeine and/or caffeine. You need to be very careful **NOT** to "double dose" on some of these medicines.

### **What do (the) other ingredients do?**

Caffeine may improve pain relief. Caffeine, (which is also in coffee, tea, cola and some energy type drinks) is a stimulant - it increases blood pressure and speeds up the heart. Taking OTC medications that contain caffeine may increase feelings of nervousness and dizziness, especially if combined with regular intake of caffeine-containing teas or coffees.

Doxylamine is a sedating antihistamine that may help to relieve muscle spasms and may be helpful for tension headaches.

## **Does your pain impact on your lifestyle?**

Long-term pain can often affect your quality of life.

- Do you need to take this medicine continuously for more than three days?
- Do you have low moods?
- Do you suffer from a lack of sleep, are tired and often irritable?
- Do you find it difficult to concentrate?
- Does the pain make it difficult for you to exercise?

If you answer “yes” to any of these questions then you need help in managing your symptoms and it is important that you talk to your doctor.

## **Side effects of pain relievers, and the risks of taking them long-term**

All OTC medicines can cause side effects – these may be mild but can also be very serious, especially if you take them for long periods of time or more than the recommended daily doses.

- Paracetamol is generally safe but an overdose can cause serious liver damage or death.
- High doses or long-term use of NSAIDs (anti-inflammatories) may lead to indigestion, bleeding from the gut (vomiting blood or bleeding from the bowel), kidney problems, increased blood pressure, fluid retention, and may result in a slightly increased risk of heart attack and stroke. They may also reduce blood-clotting benefits and worsen asthma.
- Aspirin must NOT be given to children under 16 years because of a very rare illness called Reye’s syndrome that can be fatal.
- Prolonged use of pain relievers containing codeine can lead to constipation, “chronic daily headache” and addiction and tolerance.

If you have any unwanted side effects or concerns, you should seek advice from your doctor or pharmacist.

## **Risks**

Never take medicines containing codeine or other medicines containing ingredients similar to codeine (e.g. OTC cough mixtures) for longer than three days without medical advice, because tolerance or addiction can develop. You may find it helpful to read, <http://www.painmanagement.org.au/otc-medicines>

## **How do I know if I have developed tolerance or addiction?**

If you answer “yes” to any of these questions then you need help in managing your symptoms and it is important that you talk to your doctor.

- Do you feel that you need to take the codeine products for longer periods of time than instructed on the pack?
- Do you find yourself buying more and more pills?
- Do you feel the need to take more than the recommended dose?
- Do you feel very unwell when you stop taking the medicine but you feel better if you start taking the medicine again?

## **Chronic daily headache**

If you are taking pain relievers for 15 days or more a month, you run the risk of developing ‘rebound headaches’ that usually last for more than four hours. A clear management plan with your doctor is needed to help you discontinue the overuse of pain relievers, or the chronic daily headache will persist.

## **Reference:**

*The British Pain Society, ‘Managing your pain effectively using “Over the Counter” (OTC) Medicines’.*