



PAIN RELIEVERS

also known as painkillers or analgesics

Pain can be caused by physical injuries (e.g. cuts, burns) and some diseases.

It can also be caused by emotions such as stress and anxiety. There are different types of pain relievers to suit different types of pain. Pharmacists and doctors can advise on the most effective pain reliever for your needs.

What is pain

Pain is your body's way of saying that something is wrong and you need to avoid or remove the cause. Pain generally occurs in one of two ways:

Acute pain

e.g. headache, burn, sprain

- An immediate reaction to an illness, infection or injury such as a broken bone, muscle sprain etc
- Lasts a few days, and may be severe
- Can sometimes recur, as flare-ups of a condition e.g. pain with gout (see *Gout* Fact card).

Chronic pain

e.g. back pain, arthritis, cancer pain

- Longer-lasting pain, usually less severe than acute pain
- Pain may come and go or may be a constant dull ache.

Pain may also be classed as pain with or without inflammation (redness, heat and swelling). For example, a simple headache may just involve pain whereas a sprained ankle will often be painful and inflamed.

How do we feel pain?

Pain is picked up by nerves at the site of injury or origin of the pain and a message is sent to the brain. At the same time, chemicals that cause inflammation may be released around the injury.

How pain relievers work

Pain relievers reduce the physical discomfort of pain.

- Aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) work at the injury site to stop the pain message being sent. They also reduce inflammation.

- Paracetamol is thought to stop the pain message reaching the brain.
- Pain relievers such as codeine work in the brain to stop the signal registering as pain.
- Other pain relievers are available with a prescription – speak to a doctor if the pain is not being relieved properly.

Using pain relievers

Part of good pain relief is matching the right pain reliever to the type of pain.

The form of a pain reliever can affect how well it works and the chance of side effects. For example, a cream or gel may be better for muscle pain, and a soluble tablet may give quicker relief for a headache.

How medicine is taken also affects how well it will work. For example, it is sometimes better to take pain relievers regularly for a few days rather than as needed. Ask a pharmacist or doctor to advise on the best way to take pain relievers for your condition.

Paracetamol

- Relieves minor aches and pains e.g. muscle and joint pain, headache, nerve pain such as sciatica, and pain from cuts and sprains
- Reduces fever – suitable for all ages (ask your pharmacist)

Important

Generally, pain relievers are meant to be used as a short-term treatment for physical pain.

Using high doses of pain relievers for long periods can lead to serious kidney or liver damage, and users can become dependent on them.

- Is suitable for people who are sensitive to aspirin or other NSAIDs e.g. people with stomach problems, some people with asthma (ask a pharmacist).

Aspirin and other NSAIDs

Aspirin is a type of NSAID. Other examples include ibuprofen, naproxen and diclofenac.

NSAIDs:

- Relieve minor aches and pains and period pain
- Reduce inflammation e.g. sprains, arthritis
- Reduce fever (talk to a pharmacist or doctor before giving aspirin to children or teenagers with chicken pox, influenza or fever)
- May make asthma worse in some people (ask your pharmacist)
- Can cause stomach irritation – take with or after food
- May cause or worsen stomach or duodenal ulcers – do not use if you have or have had ulcers unless advised by your doctor.

Check with a pharmacist or doctor before using these pain relievers if you:

- Are pregnant
- Are taking medicines to reduce blood clotting
- Have recently had or will be having dental work or surgery
- Have stomach pains.

Aspirin also reduces blood clotting – a doctor may prescribe low doses of aspirin to decrease the risk of having a heart attack or a stroke.

Codeine

- Used with aspirin or paracetamol to give greater pain relief
- May cause drowsiness
- Can cause constipation (see *Constipation* Fact Card)
- If used regularly can cause dependence (ask a pharmacist).

Combinations

Some pain relievers are used in combination with other medicines. For example, pain

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist



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relievers are often combined with cold and flu medicines to reduce aches and fever. Different products may contain the same pain reliever. To avoid doubling up, always check the ingredients list.

Self care

- Check with a pharmacist and doctor if you need to use a pain reliever for more than three days in a row.
- Always tell a doctor, dentist or pharmacist if you are taking a pain reliever.
- Read the labels and follow the directions to get the best result from the pain reliever.
- Do not exceed the recommended maximum dose of the pain reliever.
- Do not take pain relievers to continue working or playing sport with an injury.
- Pain can also be reduced by non-medicine means, such as applying hot/cold packs, physiotherapy, TENS machines, acupuncture etc. Ask a doctor and pharmacist.
- Some pain can be prevented e.g. muscle strains by warming up before playing sport, sunburn by applying sunscreen and covering up before going out in the sun, etc.
- Learn to relax – especially if stress brings on pain such as headache (see *Relaxation Techniques, Headache and Migraine* Fact Cards).

Other relevant Fact Cards

- *Period Problems*
- *Osteoporosis*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Sprains & Strains*
- *Sense in the Sun*
- *Arthritis*
- *Migraine*
- *Gout*
- *Constipation*
- *Headache*

Contact

Your doctor – listed under medical practitioners in the yellow pages of the phone book

For help with drug problems – organisations listed under 'Alcohol & Drugs' on the help reference page at the front of the telephone book.

A Self Care pharmacist ph. (02) 6283 4777

In case of poisoning, phone the **Poisons Information Centre** on 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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