

This booklet was written by the staff of the Pain Relief Foundation and endorsed by The Walton Centre Pain Team, Walton Centre for Neurology & Neurosurgery, Lower Lane, Liverpool, L9 7LJ, UK. www.thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk

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“OVER-THE-COUNTER” MEDICINES FOR PAIN RELIEF

Introduction

- ◆ There is a wide range of pain relief medicines available without prescription from chemists and supermarkets these days. This leaflet explains how these medicines work and when they could be taken. Pain relief medicines are also called analgesics.

What are these medicines?

- ◆ There are 3 main types of pain relief medicine available:

Paracetamol

Anti-inflammatories. (Also known as Non Steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs NSAIDs). Ibuprofen and aspirin are the only anti-inflammatories available without a prescription.

Weak opiates. Codeine and dihydrocodeine in combination with other painkillers are available over-the-counter.

- ◆ These types of medicines are often sold in combinations such as paracetamol with codeine eg. Solpadeine®, Veganin® or ibuprofen with codeine eg. Nurofen® Plus, Solpaflex®, Dihydrocodeine with paracetamol eg. Paramol®. In addition many preparations also contain caffeine, a mild stimulant also found in coffee and tea.
- ◆ Many “cold and ‘flu’ remedies containing these painkillers also contain decongestants, but decongestants are outside the scope of this leaflet.
- ◆ Note that brand named medicines are always more expensive than unbranded non-proprietary medicines but they contain the same drug eg. Panadol® which is simply paracetamol and Nurofen® which is ibuprofen.

Always read the labels. Make sure you know what the medicine contains. Many of these products are unsuitable for children, the elderly, pregnant women and breast feeding mothers. Never exceed the maximum recommended dose. If you have any questions always ask your pharmacist (chemist) or doctor. They will be pleased to offer help and advice.

- ◆ **Paracetamol** acts as a painkiller and is useful for mild to moderate pain. It causes less irritation of the stomach than aspirin and ibuprofen which makes it suitable for long term use.

Paracetamol reduces fevers (high temperature) and is often used in cold and flu remedies in combination with a decongestant. **Overdoses** of paracetamol are very dangerous and can cause liver damage leading to permanent harm or death. If you or someone else has taken an overdose, tell your doctor or go to your nearest A & E department immediately.

Paracetamol is suitable for children and many child preparations are available, often as a liquid eg. Calpol.

- ◆ **Aspirin** acts as a painkiller and is useful for mild to moderate pain, such as muscle pain and headache. It also has anti-inflammatory properties but ibuprofen is better. Aspirin is also useful for reducing fever (high temperatures). Aspirin is best for short lasting pain and should not be used for long term pain.

Aspirin also has anti-platelet or blood thinning properties and is used to prevent deep vein thrombosis, stroke and heart attacks. (Aspirin should not be taken with warfarin).

Aspirin can cause irritation of the stomach and should be taken with or after food. Some people can be allergic to aspirin. Aspirin should not be given to children under 16 years.

- ◆ **Ibuprofen** acts as a painkiller and has anti-inflammatory properties. It is useful for period pain, headache including migraine and for pain with inflammation such as arthritis. Ibuprofen can be taken for long term chronic conditions eg. back pain and arthritis.

Ibuprofen reduces fevers and is often used in cold and flu remedies in combination with a decongestant.

Ibuprofen can irritate the stomach and should not be taken at the same time as aspirin. It should always be taken with food. Ibuprofen can cause a stomach ulcer which could bleed. This is more likely in older people (over 60 years). It should not be taken by people who are allergic to NSAIDs or aspirin.

- ◆ **Codeine and dihydrocodeine** are weak morphine-like medicines that act as painkillers. Preparations containing codeine or dihydrocodeine together with paracetamol or codeine with ibuprofen are available without a prescription. These are useful for mild to moderate pain.

Codeine and dihydrocodeine can cause side effects such as constipation, nausea, vomiting and drowsiness.

Which painkillers should I take?

- ◆ For any pain problem try paracetamol first. Ibuprofen may be better for some pain but older people should avoid ibuprofen. Codeine with paracetamol may work better than paracetamol alone.
- ◆ Make sure you know what medicines are in combined preparations and read the information leaflet provided in the packet before taking the medicine. NEVER exceed the recommended dose of any medicine.
- ◆ Over-the-counter painkillers should not be taken continuously. If the pain persists you should consult your GP.
- ◆ Overuse of painkillers for headache can cause chronic daily headaches. If you take any painkiller for headache you should have at least 3 days each week without taking any painkillers.

CREAMS AND OINTMENTS—TOPICAL PREPARATIONS

- ◆ Pain relief creams which are rubbed into the skin often work by producing mild irritation of the skin (counter irritation) eg. products containing capsaicin or mustard oil which cause a burning sensation, or menthol and camphor which produce heat. They can be useful for superficial or deep pain of muscles, tendons and joints.
- ◆ Topical NSAIDs such as ibuprofen and products containing aspirin may give some relief in muscle and joint pain although their beneficial effect is not proven.
- ◆ These preparations often come in various combinations eg. Aspirin with menthol, acetic acid with turpentine, and may contain camphor, eucalyptus oil, capsaicin, arachis oil, clove oil and other irritants.
- ◆ Use gentle massage only. Avoid your face and eyes. Wash hands after use. Do not use excessive amounts. Do not use on children. Read the list of contents and follow all manufacturers instructions.

Remember to speak to your pharmacist or doctor if you have any questions about pain relief medicines.