



Your Pharmacy
...your neighbour

Health Really Matters™

PAIN RELIEVERS

Of all the medical symptoms, pain is the most common. This newsletter is a review of the non-prescription (OTC) oral and topical medications available to treat pain.



Pain is responsible for the majority of visits to the doctor's office. It can reduce our quality of life and affect our performance at work. When faced with pain, people generally look to the shelves of the pharmacy for help. Some products contain only pain medications. Others contain extra ingredients to stimulate, to sedate, to decongest and even to stop a cough... in addition to relieving pain. Which one is best for you?

In Canada, there are only four medications available without prescription to help reduce pain. They are acetaminophen, ASA, ibuprofen and codeine. Here is some information on each of these medications to help you choose the best one to reduce your pain and discomfort. It is helpful to know the source and type of pain to make an informed choice of a pain-reliever.

Pain Relievers:

Acetaminophen (eg. Tylenol) is the most commonly used pain-reliever worldwide. It relieves fever as well as pain. This drug has the best safety profile of any pain reliever which accounts for its great popularity. It has very little anti-inflammatory effect but can be effective with headaches and many minor aches and pains. It is a good choice in people who have a history of ulcers. It is important not to exceed the recommended dosage. This applies to children as well as adults. Generally, acetaminophen is a safe and effective pain reliever.

NSAIDs (Non-Steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs) include ASA (Aspirin) and Ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil). Unlike acetaminophen, these drugs have a definite anti-inflammatory effect as well as the ability to reduce pain. They are particularly good for dental pain, muscle aches and joint pain. People with a history of peptic ulcers or kidney problems should not take ASA or ibuprofen.

Of the two products, ASA has more side effects and should be used with caution. It should never be given to children under the age of 12 due to its association with Reye's Syndrome, a potentially fatal neurological condition. There is an enteric-coated version and a buffered version of ASA to make it easier on the stomach. If you are on a blood-thinner like warfarin, avoid ASA because it can change how the blood thinner works.

Codeine is a narcotic and is available in small doses combined with ASA or acetaminophen. You must ask the pharmacist for this product to ensure the product is right for you. Codeine can cause constipation and interacts with alcohol to cause drowsiness and impaired reflexes. Some products contain caffeine to counteract this side effect. The caffeine, however, can cause sleep problems in some people.

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COMBINATION PRODUCTS

Acetaminophen is found in literally hundreds of different preparations. It is often found combined with medications to relieve cough, nose or chest congestion as well as relieving pain and fever. So you will find preparations that contain antihistamines, decongestants, expectorants (to loosen chest congestion) and cough suppressants (like dextromethorphan).

However, if you don't have those extra symptoms and are experiencing only pain, it is best to stay with the product containing only acetaminophen. It's not advisable to take a drug for a condition you aren't suffering from. But if you have a cold and have a lot of nasal congestion and pain and discomfort, a combination product may be just the thing to make you feel better. As mentioned, codeine is added to certain preparations to increase the analgesic effect. This drug can cause drowsiness and extreme caution must be used when driving while taking this drug.

Some combination products contain medication that could increase blood pressure so should be used with caution in people with high blood pressure. This is due to the decongestant medication in the product that works by constricting the blood vessels and reducing the swelling in the nasal passages.

As pharmacists, we are experienced in knowing when an over-the-counter pain remedy is not appropriate and will recommend you see a doctor. Situations where this may occur is when pain is severely higher than any previously experienced or if it has increased substantially over a period of a few days with no apparent reason. Another reason we may recommend a doctor is if the current dose of pain reliever you are giving a child is not working.

When you have questions about pain-relievers or any other type of medication, our Medicine Centre pharmacists are always available to answer your questions. If, after talking to you about your problem, we feel a medication is appropriate, we will suggest the product that is right for you.

IMPORTANT REMINDER: Never exceed the recommended doses on the label and keep all medications out of reach of children.

Pain Relievers Continued...

Over-the-counter pain medications do an adequate job much of the time. If the medication doesn't resolve the problem within 10 days, seek your doctor's help. In some situations you may need a stronger analgesic or some other form of treatment. Pain is a symptom and is signifying a problem. In discovering the source of the problem, your doctor will be better able to know how to treat it. To help you describe the intensity of pain to your doctor, use a pain scale, like a scale of zero to ten where 0 indicates no pain while 10 is the worst possible pain imaginable. This helps the doctor understand your pain better and will be better able to prescribe the appropriate pain prescription for you.

TOPICAL PREPARATIONS: HEAT AND COLD RUBS

For acute injuries causing pain, applying ice for 20 minutes 3-4 times a day for three days or so can help. For more chronic muscle or arthritic pain, heat application often brings relief. The oral OTC pain medications can be used concurrently with heat or cold applications. For muscle and joint pain, backaches and osteoarthritis, certain creams and rubs may work really well. They appear to work by causing some irritation on the surface of the skin that masks the pain deeper in the tissues. They can be either "cool" or "heat" producing rubs. They contain chemicals like methyl salicylate ("locker room odour"), menthol and camphor. For shingles pain, products containing capsaicin work quite well when applied according to the package instructions. Our Medicine Centre pharmacists can advise you if you are suffering from this very intense type of pain. As with oral OTC analgesics, topical rubs and creams are to be used for a limited length of time. If no relief is felt after ten days or so, check with your doctor.

The Medicine Centre brand of acetaminophen, ASA and ibuprofen are available in our pharmacies and they are made to very high standards and will give you the same effect as the brand named drugs while saving you some money. Our Medicine Centre pharmacists will be happy to advise you about this.