

# ANALGESICS



## FACTS FOR PARENTS

Pain is a feeling that we all experience at some time during our lives. It tells us that something is wrong. The best treatment for this pain will depend upon its cause and severity. Like adults, children and adolescents also experience pain, whether it is from a toothache, headache, infection, operation or sporting injury. During adolescence, girls may also begin to experience menstrual pain.

Parents often give their child pain relievers (**analgesics**) in an attempt to ease their discomfort, pain, fever or inflammation. Often analgesics are the most effective way of doing this. However, the incorrect use of analgesics by children may cause a number of problems. Parents can play a key role in preventing these problems from occurring.

### CHILDREN AND ANALGESICS

Sometimes analgesics are the best way of reducing pain in the short-term. For example, analgesics can be useful in reducing the pain associated with a migraine, injury, cold, flu or infection if taken as directed.

However, while analgesics can be a good short-term treatment, extra care should be taken when giving analgesics to children. Analgesics are powerful pain relieving drugs that should only be given to children when there is

good cause. Not only can these drugs have unpleasant side effects if not used as directed, but some are not recommended for children.

Children under the age of 12 years should **NOT** be given aspirin, unless prescribed by a doctor. Aspirin can increase the risk of Reye's Syndrome in children. Reye's Syndrome is a rare but serious condition that affects all organs of the body, particularly the liver and brain. If an analgesic is required, one containing paracetamol should be used.

Analgesics containing codeine should not be given to children under the age of two years. Children this age may be more susceptible to the respiratory depressant effects of codeine, including respiratory arrest, coma and even death.

It is important to monitor your child's use of analgesics to make sure he/she does not take too many or take them unnecessarily. Teenagers in particular often take responsibility for their own pain relief and parents may be unaware of their need for or use of analgesics.

Finally, analgesics are often the first drugs that children use. How parents handle this can have a powerful impact on their children's attitudes towards drugs and choosing drug-related solutions to problems.

### PARENTS' ROLE IN ANALGESIC USE

Parents are powerful role models who play an essential role in preventing their child from using analgesics inappropriately. Children often learn by observing what other people do and copying them. Young children learn most from their parents. This means that you are your child's most important example:

- Set a good example when using analgesics. By showing your child that you can sometimes relieve your pain without using analgesics, he/she will be less likely to see drugs as the only method of pain relief. *How you handle analgesic use may affect how your child sees other drug use issues.*
- Communicate openly and honestly with your child about analgesics. It is important to listen to your child and discuss the risks of analgesic use, safe ways to use analgesics and alternative methods of pain relief. Try to identify his/her reasons for using analgesics.
- Monitor your child's use of analgesics.
- Set clear family rules about using analgesics and other drugs.
- Understand when analgesics are necessary and when alternatives are available or may be preferable. Encourage and support your child to try other ways to reduce low level pain and discomfort.

When giving your child analgesics it is important to:

- Choose the most appropriate analgesic for your child's age and the cause of pain.

Your doctor or a pharmacist can help you identify the most appropriate drug to use.

- Only give your child the dose recommended on the packet. The dose has been worked out to minimise the negative effects and maximise the positive effects. Giving more than the recommended dose will not increase the positive effects. Make sure that your child does not exceed the recommended dose as analgesics can have unpleasant side effects and should be used only as directed.
- Take your child to see a doctor if he/she is troubled by frequent headaches or pain, a persistent cough or high fever, or respiratory problems like asthma or bronchitis.
- Try to find alternatives to analgesics when the pain is not severe or not expected to last long. Further information about alternatives is provided later in the brochure.

### WHAT ARE ANALGESICS?

**Analgesics** are drugs that relieve pain without producing unconsciousness. There are two categories of analgesics: **narcotic** and **non-narcotic**. Some analgesics contain a mixture of these two types of drugs.

1. **Narcotic analgesics** such as codeine, morphine and methadone are used to relieve severe pain. These are usually only available with a doctor's prescription. However, some over-the-counter painkillers such as cold and flu remedies contain some narcotic analgesic (codeine).

2. **Non-narcotic analgesics** are used to treat mild to moderate pain and are less likely to cause unpleasant side effects than narcotic analgesics. There are two types of non-narcotic analgesics:

- **Acetaminophen analgesics** (e.g. paracetamol) are used to reduce fever and mild pain but have no anti-inflammatory action.
- **Non-steroidal inflammatory analgesics** (e.g. aspirin, ibuprofen) are also used to reduce fever and mild pain but have an anti-inflammatory action (that is, relieve swelling, redness and inflammation).

Non-narcotic analgesics can be bought over-the-counter from a supermarket or pharmacy.

### HEALTH EFFECTS OF ANALGESIC USE

Although analgesics are readily available from pharmacies and supermarkets, they should be used with caution. Like all drugs, analgesics have the potential to cause unpleasant side effects if they are used in large doses, too frequently or for a long period of time. These effects may include:

- nausea and vomiting
- heartburn
- reduced appetite
- diarrhoea or constipation
- bleeding from the stomach and stomach ulcers
- dizziness
- abdominal pain
- kidney damage
- tinnitus (ringing in the ears)

- skin rash
- aggravation of asthma.

Giving children analgesics too often or giving them more than the recommended dose can do more harm than good. Children may suffer from chronic headaches and stomach and kidney damage as a result of excessive analgesic use. Also, if analgesics are taken too often, the body stops making its own pain relievers, leaving the child without any natural defences to pain.

### ANALGESICS AND OTHER DRUGS

Using analgesics in combination with other drugs (including medications) is known as **polydrug use**. Drugs can interact with each other in the body, leading to unexpected, exaggerated or unpleasant side effects. If your child is on other medication, check which analgesics to use with your doctor or pharmacist.

Mixing analgesics with alcohol can be dangerous. This may cause drowsiness, impaired coordination and slower reflexes. This makes it dangerous to operate machinery or drive. It is important for your child to be aware of these potential effects.

### ALTERNATIVES TO USING ANALGESICS

Giving your child analgesics may not be the most effective way of relieving his/her pain. There are a variety of drug-free alternatives that you can use, depending on the degree of pain and the causes of it.

## FACTS FOR PARENTS

Cause of Pain	Alternatives
Tension headache	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Encourage your child to lie down and rest.</li> <li>■ If your child is worried or anxious, ask what is bothering him/her and what might help to reduce his/her tension.</li> <li>■ If your child wears glasses, check he/she is wearing them appropriately and that the glasses suit his/her eyes.</li> </ul>
Headache caused by dehydration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Encourage your child to drink lots of water, especially if the weather is hot or he/she has been out in the sun playing sports. Many headaches are caused by dehydration.</li> <li>■ Let your child rest in a cool, dark room.</li> </ul>
Migraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Lay your child down to rest in a dark room.</li> <li>■ Avoid bright or flashing lights.</li> <li>■ Try gently massaging the face, neck, head and shoulders.</li> <li>■ Place an ice pack on his/her temple.</li> </ul>
Headache (other causes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Take your child to a doctor if he/she has bumped his/her head or injured him/herself.</li> <li>■ Encourage your child to eat regularly. Skipping meals can cause headaches.</li> </ul>
Menstrual pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Give your child a warm drink.</li> <li>■ Place a hot water bottle on the painful area.</li> <li>■ Try massaging the lower back.</li> <li>■ Encourage your child to exercise regularly. When the pain starts gentle exercise such as walking or yoga may help.</li> </ul>

**However, there are times when analgesics may be the best option, regardless of alternative therapies (e.g. injury, to ease a migraine or to lower fever). Talk to your doctor if your child has a recurrent problem.**

### STORING ANALGESICS

Keep them out of reach of young children, preferably in a locked childproof cabinet.

Ask your pharmacist to put medicines in containers with childproof tops.

Store them in a cool place at the recommended temperature.

Do not use analgesics or other medications that are beyond their expiry date. Paracetamol becomes toxic after its expiry date. Your pharmacist can dispose of old medicines.

### MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information about analgesics or any other drugs, contact:

#### **The Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)**

24-hour confidential telephone service providing information, counselling and advice for people concerned about alcohol or other drug use.

Telephone (metro only): (08) 9442 5000

Toll free (country only): 1800 198 024

E-mail: [adis@health.wa.gov.au](mailto:adis@health.wa.gov.au)

#### **The Parent Drug Information Service (PDIS)**

Confidential telephone support, counselling, information and referral service for parents.

Telephone (metro only): (08) 9442 5050

Toll free (country only): 1800 653 203

#### **HealthInfo**

Provides information resources and health service referrals.

Telephone: 1300 135 030



**Drug and Alcohol Office**  
Government of Western Australia