

ANALGESICS



FACTS FOR STUDENTS

We all experience pain at some stage during our lives, whether it be from a toothache, a headache, an infection, a sporting injury or an operation. Pain tells us that something is wrong. It can be treated in many different ways depending on the type of pain and its cause. Often people take pain relievers to help ease their pain. Another term for pain relievers is **analgesics**.

WHAT ARE ANALGESICS?

Analgesics are medicines that help to control pain. There are many different types of analgesics. The most common are:

- paracetamol
- aspirin
- combination products that may contain aspirin or paracetamol and a substance called codeine.

There are two categories of analgesics: **narcotic** and **non-narcotic**.

1. **Narcotic analgesics** such as codeine, morphine and methadone are used to relieve severe pain.
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 (swelling and inflammation relieving) action. **Non-steroidal inflammatory analgesics** (e.g. aspirin) are also used to reduce fever and mild pain but have an anti-inflammatory action.

Non-narcotic analgesics can be bought over-the-counter from a supermarket or pharmacy. To treat severe pain, a doctor may prescribe stronger analgesics, which can only be bought from a pharmacy with a prescription.

WHEN SHOULD ANALGESICS BE USED?

Analgesics can be effective in relieving the pain and discomfort caused by a migraine, colds and flu, headaches, backaches, menstrual (or period) pain and muscular aches. However, analgesics are usually only meant to be used for a short period of time. They should never be used for more than three days without medical supervision.

If you do use analgesics, there are a number of things to remember:

- analgesics should be used strictly as directed. Read the instructions on the label and take the *recommended dose*.

Taking more than the recommended dose will not increase the positive effects, and may cause unpleasant side effects such as vomiting, diarrhoea or dizziness

- analgesics should only be used when in date (the expiry date is on the packet). Paracetamol becomes toxic after its expiry date
- if the pain persists, visit your doctor.

Analgesics will not:

- cure whatever is causing your pain
- prevent a headache
- boost your energy levels.

HEALTH EFFECTS OF ANALGESIC USE

Although analgesics may help to control pain in the short-term, with over-use or prolonged use they can cause unpleasant side effects, including:

- nausea and vomiting
- stomach ulcers
- chronic headaches
- decreased appetite
- constipation or diarrhoea
- abdominal pain
- kidney damage
- aggravation of asthma
- dizziness
- skin rash
- tinnitus (ringing in the ears)
- heartburn.

The type, number of and intensity of negative effects will depend upon:

- the type of analgesic being used
- the number of analgesics consumed
- how long the analgesics are being used for
- the health of the user
- existing medical conditions
- whether other drugs are also being used.

ANALGESICS AND OTHER DRUGS

Analgesics can be dangerous if used in combination with other medications or drugs. Using two or more drugs at the same time is commonly known as *polydrug* use.

Combining analgesics with alcohol may cause drowsiness, loss of coordination and slower reflexes. These side effects make it dangerous to operate machinery or drive.

If you are prescribed analgesics, it is important to tell your doctor if you are taking other medications or drugs. This will prevent the analgesic and other drugs from interacting in your body, which may produce unpleasant side effects.

COPING WITHOUT ANALGESICS

Headaches and menstrual pain are two common types of pain that can sometimes be relieved using drug-free methods. These methods can help you remove the **cause** of the pain, and can be more effective than using an analgesic.

FACTS FOR STUDENTS

Cause of Pain	Alternatives
Tension headache	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lie down and rest in a cool, dark room. ■ If you are worried about something, try talking to someone about it. Together you may be able to come up with a solution. ■ Listen to music. ■ If you wear glasses, check that they suit your eyes and are fitted correctly.
Headache caused by dehydration (sport, sun)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Drink lots of water, especially if the weather is hot or you have been playing sport. Many headaches are caused by dehydration. ■ Rest in a cool, dark room.
Migraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Avoid bright or flashing lights. ■ Ask someone to massage your face, neck, head and shoulders. ■ Rest and relax. ■ Use an ice pack on the temples.
Headache (other causes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ See your doctor if you have bumped your head or injured yourself. ■ Eat regularly. Skipping meals can cause headaches.
Menstruation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Have a warm drink. ■ Place a hot water bottle on the painful area. ■ Ask someone to massage your lower back. ■ Light exercise such as walking or yoga might help.

REMEMBER

- **There may be other ways to cope with pain other than using analgesics.**
- **The best way to avoid pain is by staying fit and healthy. This means you should exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet, get plenty of sleep and learn good relaxation techniques.**
- **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).**

MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information about pain relief or analgesics, contact:

- your doctor, pharmacist or school nurse.

- **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

- **HealthInfo**

Provides information resources and health service referrals.

Telephone: 1300 135 030

- The **Drug Aware** website also contains information on analgesics and other drugs. Visit www.drugaware.com.au and look under the **Drug Info** section.