

Pain relievers

(also known as painkillers or analgesics)

Different types of pain-relieving medicines are available for treating different types of pain. Pharmacists and doctors can advise you on the best pain relievers for your pain.

When an area of the body is damaged or stressed, nerves from the affected area carry a message to the brain, which we call pain. Pain is an unpleasant sensation or feeling that may be mild or severe, sharp or dull and acute or chronic.

Acute pain

Acute pain is pain that starts suddenly and lasts for a short time. It may be mild or severe and may last a few minutes, hours, days or weeks. The cause of acute pain is usually known. Causes include bites, burns, headaches, broken bones and surgery.

Chronic pain

Chronic pain is pain that occurs on most days of the week for longer than 3 months. It can be due to a long-lasting medical condition (e.g. arthritis, cancer), or it can be pain that continues long after healing has occurred. Sometimes the cause of a person's chronic pain cannot be found.

Pain that continues after healing may be due to changes in the nervous system.

Medicines for pain relief

Pain-relieving medicines don't always stop all pain, but can reduce pain to a level that does not affect daily life. There are a number of different types of pain relievers that suit different types of pain. The choice of a pain reliever and how well it reduces the pain depend on a number of things including:

- a person's age, medical condition(s) and other medicines
- the type of pain, where it occurs and how strong it is
- the form of pain reliever - pain relievers are available in different forms including soluble tablets, immediate-release tablets, slow-release tablets, mixtures, injections, creams, gels and patches

- how often the pain reliever is used
 - sometimes it is better to use pain relievers at regular intervals 'by the clock', rather than 'as needed'.

Non-prescription pain relievers

Some pain relievers do not need to be prescribed by a doctor. You can buy them, and get advice about their use, from a pharmacy. Non-prescription medicines that can relieve pain include paracetamol, some anti-inflammatory pain relievers and some complementary medicines.

Paracetamol

Paracetamol:

- can relieve mild or moderate pain
- (e.g. headache, muscle and joint pain)
- can reduce fever
- is suitable for all ages
- has a low risk of side effects and other problems when used as directed.

Paracetamol is available as tablets, capsules, mixtures and suppositories.

Anti-inflammatory pain relievers

Anti-inflammatory pain relievers include aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen and diclofenac. These medicines can:

- relieve mild to moderate pain
- reduce inflammation (e.g. gout, arthritis)
- reduce fever.

They are available as tablets, capsules, mixtures, creams and gels.

Anti-inflammatory pain relievers can cause serious side effects if used in high doses and/or for too long. Check with a pharmacist or doctor before using anti-inflammatory pain relievers especially if you:

- are sensitive to aspirin
- are pregnant or trying to become pregnant
- have asthma, high blood pressure or heart, kidney, liver or stomach problems
- take a medicine or have a medical condition that affects blood clotting
- take any other medicines
- have recently had or will be having surgery or dental work
- have a muscle or joint injury.

Always use the lowest dose of anti-inflammatory pain relievers that relieves your symptoms. If you need to use them for more than a few days, get medical advice. Stop taking anti-inflammatory pain relievers and get medical advice if you have swollen ankles, breathing problems, unexplained bruising or bleeding, heartburn, black faeces or coffee-coloured vomit.

Combination products

- Some products contain combinations of pain relievers (e.g. paracetamol plus ibuprofen), or pain relievers combined with other medicines (e.g. cold and flu products, some migraine products). Always check the ingredients of combination products, to avoid taking an overdose of pain relievers.
- Some paracetamol products contain caffeine, which may increase the pain-relieving effect of paracetamol. If you want to use these products, ask a pharmacist for advice before using other products containing caffeine (e.g. tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks, chocolate).

Prescription pain relievers

If your pain is not controlled by a non-prescription pain reliever, you may need a different type of pain-relieving medicine.

A doctor can prescribe stronger pain relievers and medicines for nerve pain. Stronger pain relievers may be opioids such as codeine, tramadol, oxycodone, and morphine. Medicines for nerve pain include amitriptyline, pregabalin, gabapentin, and duloxetine.

Self care

- Check with a pharmacist or doctor if you need to use a pain reliever for more than 3 days in a row.
- Read all medicine labels and follow the directions.
- Do not take more than the recommended dose of a pain reliever. Give children the correct dose for their age and weight, according to the instructions on the label.

- Do not take pain relievers to continue working or playing sport when injured.
- Avoid alcohol when you are using an opioid pain reliever.
- Remember that pain can also be reduced by non-medicine means (e.g. hot/cold packs, physiotherapy, TENS, relaxation, massage, exercise, correct posture). Ask a doctor, pharmacist or physiotherapist for advice.
- Use relaxation techniques to manage stress – especially if stress brings on pain such as headache.
- Alert your doctor, dentist and pharmacist if you are taking pain relievers regularly.

Important

Always ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice about the best pain reliever for your pain, and about the best way to use it. Using pain relievers the wrong way can be harmful.

- High doses or constant use of some pain relievers can lead to serious kidney, liver or stomach damage.
- Daily use of codeine and other opioid pain relievers can cause physical and psychological dependence (addiction).
- Some pain relievers interact with other medicines.
- Repeated use of pain relievers for headaches can cause medication overuse headache.
- Aspirin may cause serious side effects in children. It should not be used by children under 16 years of age unless advised by a doctor.

For more information

Australian Pain Management Association

Pain Link telephone helpline: 1300 340 357
Website: www.painmanagement.org.au

Chronic Pain Australia

Website: www.chronicpinaustralia.org.au

Painaustralia

Website: www.painaustralia.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthdirect.org.au

NPS MedicineWise Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1 300 633 424)
Website: www.nps.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

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

Related Fact Cards

- » *Back pain*
- » *Children's pain and fever*
- » *Chronic pain*
- » *Constipation*
- » *Gout*
- » *Headache*
- » *Migraine*
- » *Opioids for pain relief*
- » *Osteoarthritis*
- » *Period problems*
- » *Relaxation techniques*
- » *Rheumatoid arthritis*
- » *Sprains and strains*
- » *Wise use of medicines*

Your Self Care Pharmacy:

Chronic pain

(Persistent pain)

Chronic pain is persistent or long-lasting pain. It is a complex condition that affects up to one in five Australians. There are many ways to manage chronic pain. A doctor or pharmacist can help you find the best ways to manage your pain.

When a part of your body is damaged or stressed, nerves from the affected area carry a message to the brain, which responds by causing you to feel pain. Pain is an unpleasant sensation or feeling that may be mild or severe, and acute or chronic.

The amount of pain and type of pain a person feels depends on the cause of the pain, where it occurs and how long it lasts. The way pain affects a person also depends on other factors including their mood, their beliefs about pain, and other symptoms that occur with the pain (e.g. nausea, poor sleep). People are complex and each person experiences pain in their own way. Some emotions (e.g. anger, fear), beliefs and life situations can make pain feel worse and last for longer.

Types of pain

The pain a person feels may be a mixture of different types of pain.

The main types of pain are nociceptive pain and neuropathic pain.

Nociceptive pain is the most common type of pain. It is caused by damage to body tissues. It is often described as a hot, sharp, stinging, dull, aching, throbbing or cramping feeling in the damaged area. Causes include sprains, strains, broken bones, cuts and infections.



Neuropathic pain is caused by damage or changes to nerves in the brain, spinal cord or body tissues. It is often described as burning, shooting, electric, stabbing or tingling. The person may also have other sensations, including pins and needles, numbness or a 'crawling insects' feeling. Neuropathic pain includes phantom limb pain, neuralgia caused by shingles, neuropathy caused by diabetes and pain caused by a stroke.

How long pain lasts

Acute pain is pain that starts suddenly and lasts for only a short time (minutes to weeks). The cause of acute pain is usually known. Causes include bites, burns, injuries, broken bones and surgery. In some cases (e.g. headaches) the cause may not be known.

Chronic pain is pain that occurs on most days of the week for longer than 3 months. It can be due to a long-lasting medical condition (e.g. arthritis, cancer), or it can be pain that continues long after healing has occurred. Sometimes the cause of a person's chronic pain cannot be found. Pain that continues after healing may be due to changes in emotions and the nervous system. Chronic pain makes life hard. It can affect sleep, sex, work and other activities. It can also lead to emotional and mental health problems.

Management of chronic pain

Acute and chronic pain are managed in different ways.

Acute pain needs immediate, short-term pain relief. It may also

need other treatments to help repair the tissue damage that is causing the pain. Acute pain stops with treatment and healing.

Chronic pain management aims to relieve pain, but the pain may never totally stop. Management often includes learning how to live well and enjoy life despite pain. Medicines and non-medicine therapies can help manage chronic pain. The best treatment is usually a combination of therapies.

Non-medicine therapies

Non-medicine therapies include exercise programs, lifestyle changes, physiotherapy and psychological therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT helps a person to recognise and change the thoughts that are making their pain and suffering worse.

A pain management plan is a helpful tool for managing chronic pain. Ask your doctor and other health professionals to help you make a plan. Your plan can include goals for living well with chronic pain, such as being able to enjoy your favourite activities.

Medicines

A range of medicines can be used to help manage chronic pain. See the *Pain relievers* and *Opioids for pain relief* Fact Cards for more information.

Self care

- Learn about chronic pain and the different ways to deal with it.
- Write down a record of your pain (e.g. keep a pain diary) to help you understand and control it.
- Share your feelings with your family and friends. Ask for and accept their help.
- Stay active, and do regular exercise for your physical and mental health. Ask a doctor, physiotherapist or exercise specialist about suitable activities and exercises.
- Set priorities and pace your activities so you don't get too tired.
- Have a healthy diet. Eat a variety of vegetables, fruits, wholegrain/wholemeal foods, protein-rich foods (e.g. nuts, lean meats, fish, eggs, beans) and low-fat dairy foods every day. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises you not to).
- Don't smoke. Limit alcohol to no more than two standard drinks per day.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to manage stress and tension.
- Join a pain support group.

Important

Write down and follow your pain management plan. Tell your doctor and pharmacist what pain-relieving medicines you use, and how often you use them. Seek advice from your doctor and pharmacist if:

- you want to try a new medicine
- you need more pain-relieving medicines than prescribed
- your pain is controlling your life.

For more information

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Website: www.painmanagement.org.au

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Painaustralia

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- » *Anxiety*
- » *Back pain*
- » *Depression*
- » *Diabetes type 1*
- » *Diabetes type 2*
- » *Headache*
- » *Migraine*
- » *Opioids for pain relief*
- » *Osteoarthritis*
- » *Pain relievers*
- » *Relaxation techniques*
- » *Rheumatoid arthritis*
- » *Shingles*
- » *Sleeping problems*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: