



Buying over-the-counter pain relievers

Pain is one of the most common reasons for people to visit a doctor or pharmacist. Sometimes it is quickly relieved. Sometimes pain can be a warning sign of underlying disease. If it is strong or doesn't settle easily, you should see your family doctor.

Some pain relievers are available from chemists and other retail stores. Over-the-counter pain relievers can be divided into four main groups. Each packet usually displays the chemical name of the drug (e.g. paracetamol) and the trade name (e.g. Panadol, Tylenol).

1. Paracetamol (trade names, e.g., Panadol, Panamax, Tylenol, Dymadon)

This is a very safe and effective pain relieving drug as long as it is taken in the recommended doses. However, an overdose can be very serious. It needs urgent medical attention because of the possibility of damage to the liver.

2. Aspirin (e.g. trade names, e.g., Aspro, Bayer Aspirin, Bex, Vincent Powders)

Aspirin is as effective as paracetamol. However, it does have other side effects such as irritation of the lining of the stomach. It also affects the way blood clots and may make a person more likely to bruise or bleed with injury. It may bring on or worsen an asthma attack. Aspirin is not recommended for children with a temperature, without medical advice.



3. NSAIDs, e.g. Ibuprofen (trade names, e.g., Nurofen, Actipofen, Act 3)

Recently there has been a lot of advertising for these types of drugs. Called NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), they are very effective for certain types of pain caused by inflammation. A common problem with these drugs is irritation of the lining of the stomach. Other problems are:

- i) They may react with other medications and cause a wide range of side effects.
- ii) They may bring on or worsen an asthma attack.
- iii) They may have an adverse effect on the kidneys.
- iv) They may cause fluid to be retained in the body, and raise blood pressure.

If you buy NSAIDs over the counter, it is important the pharmacist knows enough about you. Such information might include asking:

- What other (if any) medications are you taking?
- Do you have any medical problems, such as stomach irritation or ulcers, asthma, high blood pressure, kidney or heart problems?
- Have you experienced side effects from taking similar medications before?
- Do you smoke or drink much alcohol?

4. Codeine-containing medications (trade names, eg. Panadeine, Dymadon-Co, Aspalgin, Codalgin, Panamax-Co.)

Codeine is often combined with other medications such as paracetamol and aspirin. Codeine in these medications is usually well tolerated but can cause constipation, or a sick feeling in the stomach. Some people may become drowsy.

You need to discuss your problem carefully with your pharmacist and give him or her enough information before buying over-the-counter pain relievers. If you have complex medical problems, or if the pain does not settle quickly and easily, visit your family doctor for further advice.

