

How to Take Painkillers Safely



Millions of Americans suffer from some form of chronic or severe pain. Many will seek relief with painkilling drugs or analgesics. Painkillers treat the symptom of pain rather than the root cause.

Simple analgesics. This type of painkiller, such as aspirin or acetaminophen, provides relief from pain at the site of the injury or inflammation. (Aspirin decreases inflammation in addition to its analgesic effect.) These are not habit forming and they maintain effectiveness even after repeated use.

Narcotic analgesics. Analgesics such as codeine or morphine provide relief by acting on the central nervous system, rather than by decreasing inflammation. The cause of the pain does not disappear, but it is easier to endure. These drugs also cause sedation. As the body builds up a tolerance to the narcotic, dosages may need to be increased. When discontinued, withdrawal symptoms can occur.

To minimize unwanted effects of painkillers:

- Take painkillers with a full glass of milk or water. It will speed entry into the digestive system and minimize stomach upset.
- Remember that all drugs have side effects. Find out early what to expect by asking the pharmacist for the drug package insert or asking your physician.
- Take only the weakest form and the smallest dosage that will provide relief.
- Don't wait until the pain is too severe to begin your medication. Delay makes it more difficult for the painkiller to be effective, and you may need a stronger dose.
- If pain keeps you from sleeping, never take a sleeping pill along with painkillers. Use analgesics only for the pain itself.
- If you are a cigarette smoker, painkillers may be metabolized at a different rate so tell your doctor if you smoke.
- Before considering switching painkillers because of side effects, ask your doctor if he or she can reduce your dosage.
- If you are taking a narcotic type of painkiller, check with your physician about alternating it with aspirin or an acetaminophen analgesic. This will help reduce the possibility of developing a tolerance.
- Don't think of painkillers as your only weapon against pain. There are other techniques, such as relaxation training or cold compresses that your physician can help you with.