



***Medication
overuse
headache***

***Frequently
asked questions***

***Information for
patients and carers***

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Medication overuse headache is a cause of frequent or daily headaches. Taking medication too often for headaches or migraine causes it.

The treatment is to stop the medication. This is vital to cure the problem.

After stopping the medication, you may have worse and more frequent headaches for a while. However, the frequency of headaches should then gradually return to “normal”.



What is medication headache?

Medication can be very helpful to treat a headache. Unfortunately, any abortive medication (medication used to put a headache away) when taken frequently to treat headache can, over time, lead to daily or near daily headaches. This type of headache is called “medication overuse headache”. About one in fifty people develop this problem at some time in their life.

The pain receptor (nerve cell) is kept switched on by the abortive medication rather than being switched off. This means that to continue to treat the headache you need to take higher doses of the medication, take medication more often or change to a “stronger” medication. The only way to correct the situation is to stop the abortive medication. This will allow the pain receptors to reset themselves and respond normally again.

Medication overuse is the commonest complication of migraine treatment and is very common in patients with chronic headache. It has only been in the last few years that it has been recognised as a problem.

How does medication headache occur?

The following is a typical case ...

You may have a bad spell of tension headaches or migraines, perhaps during a time of stress. You take abortive medication more often than usual. You continue doing this for a while. Your body becomes used to the abortive medication.

A “rebound” or “withdrawal” headache then develops if you do not take the abortive medication within a day or so of the last dose. You think this is just another tension headache or migraine, and so you take a further dose of the abortive medication. When the effect of each dose of the abortive medication wears off, a further withdrawal headache develops, and so on.

A vicious circle develops. In time, you may have headaches on most days, or on every day, and you end up taking abortive medication every day, or on most days. Some people start to take abortive medication every day to try to prevent headaches. This only makes things worse.

Which medicines cause medication headache?

All of the common abortive medications used to treat tension-type headaches or migraine can cause this problem if used too often. These include:

- paracetamol
- paracetamol combinations, especially if combined with codeine/dihydrocodeine (for example, co-codamol, co-dydramol, Migraleve[®], Solpadeine[®] and Syndol[®]).
- anti-inflammatory painkillers such as aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen, diclofenac
- codeine, dihydrocodeine, tramadol, opiates
- triptans used for migraine (almotriptan, eletriptan, frovatriptan, naratriptan, rizatriptan, sumatriptan, and zolmitriptan)
- ergotamine (such as Cafergot[®]).

Medication overuse headache is likely if they are used on more than ten days a month or on average more than two days a week.

What about taking abortive medication for other conditions?

If you have a history of migraine or a family history of migraine, medication overuse headache can develop if you take abortive medication regularly for other painful conditions such as arthritis. It does not seem to occur in people who do not have a personal or family history of migraine.

What is the treatment for medication headache?

The most important part of treatment is to recognise and understand the cause of your frequent headaches. For most people it is best to stop the overused medication abruptly. Some people may prefer to cut down gradually and some abortive medications (in particular high doses of codeine and dihydrocodeine, tramadol and opiates) should be gradually cut down. It takes up to eight weeks for the effects of the overused medication to get out of your system. It is best not to take other abortive medications during this time.

On stopping the overused abortive medication, the headaches may get worse for a while. Some people also feel sick, become anxious or edgy, irritable, get mood swings and sleep badly. This usually lasts for two weeks but can be longer for some people.

You will have to put up with the headaches for a while, and other symptoms if they develop, until the abortive medication is “out of your system”. Your headaches should then gradually go back to a “normal” frequency.

About seven out of ten people who stop the overused abortive medication will find that their headaches are significantly better.

What can help me come off the overused abortive medication?

The most important thing is to stop the medication for long enough to allow it to be “washed out” of your system. There is no evidence that taking other medications to help the withdrawal will make it more likely that you will be successful. Some medications can however help relieve the symptoms of withdrawal. The commonly used medications are steroids, anti sickness tablets and migraine preventers.

The next step

For most people, headaches return to a less frequent pattern. For these people the next step is appropriate abortive treatment and sometimes preventative treatment.

For those who get no improvement it is worth considering preventative treatments that they've tried before. These might not have worked in the past due to the overused medication. When trying them again, it is important that a sufficient dose is used for long enough, usually at least three months. Sometimes combination treatments can be required.

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