

What **you** should **know** about.....

MEDICATION-OVERUSE HEADACHE

What is medication-overuse headache?

- It is a common cause for very frequent or daily headaches in people who used to have occasional headache attacks.
- Medication-overuse headache can occur when people take painkillers too often for their headache attacks.
- Medication-overuse headache becomes likely when you take acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol), an NSAID (ibuprofen, e.g. Advil or Motrin), or similar medications on more than 14 days per month; or a triptan (such as sumatriptan, e.g. Imitrex) or codeine-containing medication on more than 9 days per month.
- Medication-overuse headache is a problem as it can lead to more frequent headaches. It is not the same as addiction.

How is medication-overuse headache treated?

- Stop using the headache medication that is suspected of causing the increase in headache frequency.
 - For acetaminophen, ibuprofen and triptans stopping the medication abruptly (all at once) is recommended.
 - For opioid medications such as codeine, gradual reduction is recommended.
- Most people experience a temporary increase in headache symptoms or ‘withdrawal symptoms’ for a week or possibly longer after stopping their medication.
- If the withdrawal symptoms are more than you can live with, your doctor can prescribe temporary medications that may help.
- After stopping the overused medications, many people experience a gradual reduction in the frequency of their headaches.
- Medications that prevent headaches may be more effective after you’ve stopped overusing the medications you used to treat individual headache attacks.

Is medication-overuse always the cause of daily headaches?

- Not always. Even if you are ‘over-using’ these medications, there may be other or additional causes for your daily headaches.

Should I see my doctor if I suspect I have medication-overuse headaches?

- If your headaches are mild or moderate and you take more medication than is recommended above, you can try to treat yourself by stopping or reducing your medication use.
- If your headaches are severe or you are concerned about stopping the medications, you should work with your doctor to treat your headaches.
- If you’ve stopped or reduced your medications for more than a month and your headaches have not decreased, see your doctor.

What can I do to help myself?

- Use headache self-management to help avoid over-using medicines to treat individual headache attacks. (Self-management strategies such as self-awareness, pacing, and reacting early are covered in depth in the information sheet “[What You Should Know About Headache Self-management](#)”.)
- Keep track of your medication use. This may help you avoid the possibility of the medication-overuse headache.
- Use a ‘*headache diary*’ which includes recording your headache medication use.
- Work with your doctor to find better treatments for your headaches so you don’t have to use painkillers so often.

If I’ve stopped my medications and my headaches are better, can I ever use these medicines again?

- It is usually OK to treat individual headaches with acetaminophen or ibuprofen or a triptan on one or two days a week.
- It is usually best to avoid the codeine or opioid medicines.
- It may also help to explore alternatives such as headache self-management and preventive medications.