

Taking care with medicines used to relieve pain

Are you aware of the risks associated with some common painkillers?

What painkillers can be purchased in community pharmacies?

Paracetamol and ibuprofen are the most commonly used medicines to relieve mild or moderate pain e.g. headache, toothache or fever.

Stronger combination painkillers (can also be called pain relievers), which contain a mixture of paracetamol or ibuprofen along with codeine or dihydrocodeine, can sometimes be needed to treat more severe pain, for example, after an operation or injury.

Taking medicines safely

Taking more than the recommended dose of any of these medicines can cause serious harm.

Combination painkillers that you buy from a pharmacy (or other online pharmacy retail outlets) should only be used short-term, for a maximum of three days.

The leaflet or box of the medicine will tell you how to take the medicine, and for safety reasons, you should not take more than the maximum recommended dose.

If you are in any doubt, or if your pain lasts for more than three days, ask your community pharmacist for advice.

Sometimes the pharmacist may provide you with less medicine than you have asked for, or refuse to sell you any.

This may be because they are concerned about your pain or how you are using the medicine. The Pharmacist will advise you what you should do next.

Risks of combination painkillers

All medicines can cause side effects or have risks, especially if used for longer than they should be. Combination painkillers can be effective in treating short term pain, but if they are not taken safely, they can cause serious harm.

Here are some of the main things to be aware of:

- Codeine or dihydrocodeine can cause stomach pain, nausea or constipation, but one of the main concerns when taking these without review is addiction.
- Ibuprofen or aspirin can damage organs such as kidneys and may cause heart attacks, strokes or stomach problems.
- Paracetamol can cause liver damage.

Addiction

It is possible to become addicted to combined ibuprofen/paracetamol and codeine painkillers.

Some of the warning signs are:

- feeling that you need the medicine for longer periods and in higher doses than recommended;
- when stopping them, you feel unwell but you feel better when you start taking them again.

Addiction can cause long term problems for some patients, for example, with their personal life or work.

Please speak to your Community Pharmacist, General Practice Pharmacist or GP if you are worried that you may be getting addicted to these medicines, as they can provide advice.

An animation has been created to highlight the dangers associated with incorrect use of painkillers.

If you would like to view or listen to it please visit the HSCNI Vimeo account – (<https://vimeo.com/1076680448/305e627beb?activityReferer=1>)

Remember: Know, Check, Ask

Know - Combination painkillers should only be used short-term, maximum of three days.

Check - that you are using your combination painkillers the correct way.

Ask - your health care professional if you are not sure.

To find out more please click on the Know, Check, Ask webpage (<https://online.hscni.net/our-work/pharmacy-and-medicines-management/medicines-management-programmes/medication-safety/know-check-ask/>)

Further information and support

- Speak to your local Community Pharmacist.
- Find details of other groups that can help you at the Drugs and Alcohol NI website – (www.drugsandalcoholni.info)

Contact your local Drug and Alcohol Coordinating Teams at:

- Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
email address - connections@bdact.info
Phone - 028 9084 0555
- Northern Health and Social Care Trust
email address - connections@ndact.info
Phone - 028 2568 9306 or 028 2568 9356
- South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
email address - connections@sedact.info
Phone - 0800 254 5123
- Southern Health and Social Care Trust
email address - connections@sdact.info
Phone - 028 3832 2714
- Western Health and Social Care Trust
email address - connections@wdact.info
Phone - 0800 254 5123