

OVER THE COUNTER (OTC) AND PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

You have a headache from studying too much. Or you slept funny and have a 'crick' in your neck. Or you strained a muscle playing sport yesterday. There is a good chance that you will grab an analgesic such as Panadol or a Nurofen to make the aches and pains go away. Sound like something you would do?

WHAT ARE OTC OR PRESCRIPTION DRUGS?

Pharmaceutical drugs such as those 'prescribed' by your doctor or those bought 'over the counter' (or OTC) in pharmacies and supermarkets, can provide benefits by relieving pain and increasing quality of life. OTC medications are often depressants, which mean that they slow down the messages travelling between the brain and the body, however some have stimulant effects, or effects that speed up the messages travelling between the brain and the body. When taken as intended by appropriately following the instructions provided by a doctor, pharmacist or the instructions on the packet, they can safely treat specific symptoms.

However, recent surveys tell us that more and more people, including some young people, are misusing or overusing the drugs they are prescribed or buying over-the-counter. For example, they are taking more than the required dose or taking it more frequently than has been prescribed (Alcohol and Drug Foundation, 2017).

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN YOU MISUSE THESE DRUGS?

Just as with alcohol and any illicit drug, when OTC or prescription drugs are misused by taking them when symptoms aren't present or by taking increased doses, they have the potential to cause harm and may affect a person in many different ways. For example, the reports of misuse of analgesics that contain codeine, such as Nurofen, are increasing and this is emerging as a real issue of concern (Monheit, Pietrzak & Hocking, 2016). Codeine is part of a group of drugs known as opioids that are classified as depressants. Codeine is used, for example, to provide relief from pain and but its misuse has led to changes in legislation across Australia.

You may have heard that from 1 February 2018 the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) moved low-dose codeine-based pain relief from Schedule 2 and 3, to Schedule 4 (Department of Health, n.d.). This means that medicines that contain low-dose codeine are no longer available without a prescription in pharmacies. Misusing codeine, including taking more codeine than recommended on the packet, increases the risk of side-effects such as dizziness, lethargy and blurred vision, and puts you at risk of an overdose. Recognition of the rate of codeine-related harm in Australia has prompted this action.

It's good to remind yourself that all drugs have the potential to cause harm including OTC and prescription medications. People often believe that these drugs are safer than other drugs because they are legal and/or prescribed by a doctor or can be purchased from a pharmacy or supermarket. This is not always the case and depends on how they are used and what is used.

WHY SHOULDN'T YOU MIX DRUGS?

It's also important to remember not to mix OTC or prescription drugs with other drugs such as alcohol. Mixing alcohol with certain OTC or prescription drugs can cause nausea and vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting, or loss of coordination. Reading the labels on OTC or prescription drugs before use and adhering to the instructions ensures that the drugs are used safely to treat specific symptoms. And also remember that using pharmaceutical drugs without a prescription from a doctor, or selling or giving them to someone else, is illegal. It's also against the law to forge or alter a prescription.

WHAT ARE SOME ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES TO USE?

Consider alternative strategies before you use an OTC medicine to treat mild pain such as: eating food or drinking water to hydrate the body, or lying down in a dark room with a cold cloth across the forehead or back of the neck, or going for a walk and getting some fresh air. Remember these are just suggestions and if pain or aches persist, you should seek medical advice.



So, some key messages to remember about OTC and prescription medications.

1. These drugs should only be used as directed.
2. Try alternatives before using OTC medications and if you do use them – always use as intended by following the instructions provided by a doctor, pharmacist or the instructions on the packet.
3. Don't mix OTC or prescription drugs with other drugs.

REFERENCES

Australian Drug Foundation. (2017). *A guide to prescription and over the-counter drugs within our community*. Retrieved from https://adf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2014-05-27_PRESCRIPTION_WEB_screen.pdf

Monheit, B., Pietrzak, D., & Hocking, S. (2016). Prescription drug abuse – A timely update. *Substance Use*, 45(12), pp. 862-866. Retrieved from <https://www.racgp.org.au/afp/2016/december/prescription-drug-abuse-a-timely-update/>

Department of Health. (n.d.) *Codeine Information Hub*. Code Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.tga.gov.au/codeine-info-hub>



NEED HELP?

If you or anyone you know is experiencing a drug use issue, contact WA's 24hr Drug and Alcohol Support Line.

- Metro (08) 9442 5000
- Country 1800 198 024
- Emergency 000

Live chat with a qualified and experienced drug counsellor is also offered at:
<http://drugaware.com.au>