

What **You** Should **Know** About Your
Medication-Overuse Headache

Facts about medication-overuse headaches

- Taking pain medication too often for headache attacks is a common cause of very frequent or daily headaches in people who used to have only occasional headaches. When this happens, they are called 'medication-overuse headaches'. This is especially likely to happen if you have migraine headaches.
- Medication-overuse headaches become likely when taking acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol®), an NSAID (such as ibuprofen, e.g., Advil® or Motrin®), or similar medications 15 or more days a month, or a triptan (such as sumatriptan, e.g., Imitrex®) or medication containing codeine or another opioid 10 or more days a month.
- Medication overuse can lead to more frequent headaches. This is not the same as addiction.
- Medication-overuse is not always the cause of daily headaches. Even if you are using the above medications too often, there may be other or additional causes for your daily headaches.

How are medication-overuse headaches treated?

- The headache medication that is suspected of causing the increase in headache frequency is stopped:
 - For acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and triptans, stopping the medication 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. Going on a migraine preventive medication is also often helpful.
- 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 previously used to treat individual headache attacks.

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

What should I do?

- Keep track of your medication use. This may help you avoid the possibility of a medication-overuse headache.
- Use a '[headache diary](#)' to monitor your headache patterns and learn what might be causing your headaches or making them worse ('triggers'), including your headache medication use.
- Work with your doctor to find better treatments for your headaches so you don't have to use pain medications as often.
- More information on other 'self-management' strategies that may help you avoid over-using medications to treat individual headache attacks can be found in a separate info sheet.*

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

- It is usually okay to treat individual headaches with acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or a triptan on 1 or 2 days a week.
- It is usually best to avoid medications containing codeine or other opioids.
- It may also help to explore alternatives such as headache self-management and preventive medications.

***For more information on the topics covered here, see the other info sheets and the full brochure at: www.ihe.ca/research-programs/hta/aagap/headache.**