

Health risks from codeine based medicines

Codeine is a painkiller that is contained in many over the counter remedies such as headache remedies and cold and flu remedies. It is available in combination with other painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen.

Painkillers containing codeine such as Solpadeine[®] or Nurofen Plus[®] are safe if taken at the recommended dose and for no longer than 3 days. Prolonged use of codeine can cause constipation, nausea, dizziness, drowsiness, "chronic daily headache" and addiction. Because of the serious health implications of taking codeine, codeine is not available over the counter in pharmacies in most countries. Combination products containing codeine are only available over the counter in Ireland, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Poland, Estonia, Israel and Costa Rica. Because of health concerns, the pharmaceutical Society of Ireland is introducing strict controls on the sale of codeine based products such as Solpadeine[®] from August 1st 2010.

Chronic daily headaches

If you take painkillers for longer than 15 days (3 days for codeine) you run the risk of getting daily or near daily headaches. This is known as medication-overuse headaches. The headaches caused by painkiller overuse last an average of four or more hours. What happens is that after taking a painkiller for headaches for a prolonged period of time, your body becomes used to the painkillers. A 'rebound' or 'withdrawal' headache then develops if you do not take a painkiller within a day or so of the last dose. You think this is just another headache, and so you take a further dose of painkiller. When the effect of each dose has worn off, a further withdrawal headache develops, and so on. A vicious circle develops as the sufferer gets headaches everyday or most days and then ends up taking more painkillers which only makes the headaches worse. Unless the overused painkillers are stopped completely, the headaches are likely to continue. This phenomenon only seems to occur when taking painkillers for headaches; it does not seem to occur when taking painkillers regularly for other conditions like arthritis.

Medication-overuse headache is the third most common cause of headache after migraine and tension-type headache. About 1 in 50 people develops this problem at some time in their life. It can occur at any age but is most common in people in their 30s and 40s. It is more common in women than men. The headache of medication-overuse headache is often described as 'overwhelming' and tends to be worse first thing in the morning, or after exercise. It may be a constant 'dull' headache with spells when it gets worse.

Codeine is the most common cause of chronic daily headaches

Codeine is the worst culprit for chronic daily headache. Painkillers such as Solpadeine® and Nurofen Plus® which contain codeine can bring on chronic daily headaches after only three days of use. There is a serious problem in Ireland of people becoming dependant on Solpadeine® and Nurofen Plus®, with many people feeling they cannot “function” properly without taking a headache pill. The main reason for this is that the codeine in painkillers like Solpadeine® or Nurofen Plus® causes chronic daily headaches which create the vicious circle of overuse. Solpadeine overuse can ultimately lead to other serious health problems such as liver disease caused by excessive paracetamol intake which is another ingredient in Solpadeine®. Overuse of Nurofen Plus® leads to overuse of ibuprofen which leads to stomach ulcers and associated bleeding, kidney damage, raised blood pressure and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

How to break out of the cycle of chronic daily headaches

After stopping the regular use of painkillers, you are likely to have worse and more frequent headaches for a while. However, the frequency of headaches should then gradually return to 'normal'. Some people also feel sick, become anxious, or sleep badly for a few days after the painkillers are stopped. These are called 'withdrawal' symptoms. Unfortunately, these headaches and other withdrawal symptoms must be tolerated until the painkillers are 'out of your system'. If you or someone you know suffers from this problem, you can speak to your pharmacist in confidence. Your pharmacist or doctor can help overcome the vicious circle of chronic daily headaches. If the withdrawal symptoms are severe, your doctor may temporarily prescribe other medication to ease withdrawal symptoms. (see more information on CADS at end of this article)

How do you know if you are addicted to codeine?

Addiction to codeine can occur by taking over the counter remedies containing codeine for longer than the recommended 3 days. If you answer **yes** to any of the following questions you may be addicted to codeine.

- Do you feel you need to take the codeine products for longer time periods than instructed on the box?
- Do you find yourself buying more and more pills?
- Do you feel you need to take more than the recommended dose?
- Do you start to feel unwell when you stop taking the medicine but feel better when you start taking the medicine again?

These symptoms will not occur if you follow the recommended dosage instructions written on the medicine box.

Is codeine really needed as a painkiller?

Paracetamol and ibuprofen have been shown to possess effective painkilling effects without the need for codeine. Paracetamol is equally effective as a painkiller as Solpadeine[®]. Therefore, the health problems attributable to codeine are unnecessary. There are calls by many health professionals to ban over the counter codeine painkillers or only allow them on prescription. In fact, due to the serious health problems caused by codeine, codeine based painkillers are available only on prescription in most countries including America. The Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland have recently finished a consultation process on the issue; changing them to prescription only status in Ireland was considered. However, instead they opted for strict pharmacy controls instead which come into place on August 1st 2010. Prescription only status may occur in the future if these guidelines are deemed not to be controlling the health problems stemming from codeine overuse.

Common over the counter remedies which contain codeine

What many people do not realise is that many commonly used over the counter painkillers contain codeine. Many of these drugs have up to 8mg of codeine which can cause dependency and side effects even if only used for a few days. Many of these painkillers are household names. Examples include the painkillers Solpadeine[®], Maxilief[®], Panadeine[®], Nurofen Plus[®] and Veganin Plus[®]. Feminax[®] is a painkiller used for period pain in women and Migraleve[®] (yellow) is used for migraine also have 8mg of codeine. The cold and flu remedy Uniflu Plus[®] contains 10mg of codeine however Uniflu[®] has no codeine. Solpadeine Cold & Flu[®] contains pholcodine which is a derivative of codeine. There are many alternative painkillers and cold & flu remedies available in pharmacies which do not have codeine and so do not have the associated risks. Ask your pharmacist for more information. Because of the safety concerns, no pharmacy in Ireland will be able to have these codeine containing products on display from August 1st 2010 and new laws mean they can only be sold under the strict supervision of the pharmacists. Any pharmacist breaking the new regulations may find themselves in court.

New pharmacy Controls

Over the counter medicines which contain codeine such as Solpadeine[®] and Nurofen Plus[®] will have to be stored out of view of the public in pharmacies under new guidelines which come into effect on August 1st 2010. All pharmacists ensure customers know how to use such medicines properly. But according to new guidelines published by the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI), which regulates the profession, pharmacists are now legally obliged to inform all customers who buy codeine how they must be taken properly. Codeine medicines such as painkillers and cough bottles must only be supplied under the personal supervision of a pharmacist, who must advise customers that they only be used when considered necessary and for the shortest time possible, the new rules for the pharmacy profession state.

Where patients are misusing codeine, pharmacists will have to help them seek medical help, the guidelines state. All advertising of codeine products, including window displays and leaflets, is prohibited. Figures from the Health Research Board show the numbers seeking treatment for codeine as a main problem drug increased in the past 10 years from 18 in 1998 to 84 in 2008. But this is likely to be the tip of the iceberg as most people with codeine addiction problems tend to find it hard to admit to themselves and others that they have a problem.

Pharmacists who fail to adhere to the guidelines could be prosecuted in court and also find themselves before a fitness-to-practise committee hearing. The Pharmaceutical Society will have inspectors and “mystery customers” checking to ensure compliance.

Guidelines instruct that codeine based painkillers are second line

The new Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland guidelines recommend that pharmacists supply single ingredient medicines such as paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin as first line in pain relief. Combination products with codeine should only be recommended as “second line” treatments when the above treatments fail.

Paracetamol

Paracetamol is used to relieve pain and to reduce temperature and fever. It is present in many over the counter painkillers and cold and flu remedies. Paracetamol is a very safe medicine when taken at the recommended dosage and has very few interactions with other medicines. However, if used excessively and over a long period of time, paracetamol will cause liver damage and perhaps eventual liver failure. Paracetamol is present in many of the medicines which also contain codeine including Solpadeine[®], Maxilief[®], Panadeine[®], Veganin Plus[®], Feminax[®] and Uniflu plus[®]. Because of the addictive nature of codeine in the products, many people become dependant on the codeine and as a consequence end up taking excessive amounts of paracetamol. This creates the health risk of not only by taking excessive codeine, but also taking excessive paracetamol. There is evidence that liver damage has become a major problem in Ireland due to the overuse and abuse of over the counter painkillers containing paracetamol. Mixing alcohol with paracetamol will accelerate the liver damage. Signs of liver damage include diarrhoea, loss of appetite, tiredness, nausea and vomiting, restlessness, itchy skin and jaundice (yellow skin colour). It is important for your doctor to do a liver function test if you have been taking excessive paracetamol. If liver damage is discovered early it can be successfully treated.

Always read the label

It is very important to read the label and the information leaflet before taking any medicine. This is the case for prescription only and non-prescription medicines. All medicines have potential side effects and interactions. This is also the case for common over the counter remedies. For example, high doses or excessive use of the popular anti inflammatory painkiller ibuprofen (Nurofen[®]) can lead to stomach bleeding, kidney problems, fluid retention, high blood pressure and a slightly increased risk of heart attack and stroke. Ibuprofen can trigger asthma attacks in about 10% of asthmatics and can affect blood clotting. Decongestants such as Sudafed[®] and Actifed[®] should be avoided in people with high blood pressure and heart problems. Pharmacy staff members are trained to ask questions about your health and your medicine regime when you purchase medicines to ensure the medicine you are purchasing is suitable and safe for you. If there is any concerns, the pharmacy staff member will refer you to the pharmacist who will ensure you are receiving the most appropriate and safe treatment. Always ask to speak to our pharmacist if you have any queries. Whelehan's pharmacy now has a consultation room so you can ask to speak to our pharmacist in private.

Community Alcohol and Drug Service (CADS)

The HSE Community Alcohol and Drug Service offer counselling and treatment services for adults suffering from addiction to alcohol, drugs and gambling. CADS has centres in Mullingar, Athlone and Longford. CADS provides counselling and treatment to help people get over their addiction. CADS also help support family members of people suffering from addiction problems and family members can attend counselling in their own right. All services are totally confidential. You can refer yourself to the service directly. If you have a loved one or someone you know that could avail of this service you can contact CADS to discuss your options. All referrals must be made with the consent of the person being referred. CADS have experience of helping people getting over an addiction to over the counter painkillers such as Solpadeine[®]. You can contact them at 04493 41630. Leaflets on their Services are available in Whelehans Pharmacy.

Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to www.whelehans.ie or dial 04493 34591. You can also e-mail queries to info@whelehans.ie.



38 Pearse St, Mullingar

T 04493 34591

W www.whelehans.ie