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Common medical Conditions
-Triggers and Interactions

In this article, I discuss what everyday triggers and interactions you should be aware of with common medical conditions and medicines. Common substances and activities you encounter on a daily basis may need to be avoided if you suffer from certain medical conditions or take certain medicines. Examples include certain over the counter medicines (available without prescription), foods, herbs, dust mites, animal fur and activities like smoking and drinking alcohol. While most of these "everyday substances and activities" are safe in moderation to most healthy people, some can exacerbate the symptoms and prove dangerous with certain medical conditions and can interact with certain medicines.

Asthma

Anything that irritates the airways and brings on the symptoms of asthma is called a trigger. Common triggers include house dust mites, animal fur, pollen, tobacco smoke, exercise, cold air and chest infections. While it is not possible to avoid to all these common triggers, learning which ones trigger wheezing and attacks can help you control your condition. For example, it is not a good idea for some asthmatics to keep pets in the house as the animal fur can exacerbate breathing difficulties. While exercise will benefit asthma, some asthmatics suffer from "exercise induced asthma". Using your reliever inhaler about half an hour before exercise can help prevent this problem. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are commonly used painkillers which trigger asthma attacks in about 10% of asthmatics. Most NSAIDs such as diclofenic (Difene®) are only available with doctor's prescription. However, ibuprofen (Nurofen®) is an NSAID which is available over the counter without prescription. It is best avoided in asthmatics. Paracetamol is a safer painkilling alternative for asthmatics. Other triggers which are less common include emotional factors such as stress, sulphites in some foods and drinks (found in certain wines and used as a preservative in some foods such as fruit juices and jam), mould or damp in houses and food allergies (eg) nut allergy.

Constipation

A diet low in fibre and not drinking enough fluids commonly causes constipation. Lack of exercise is associated with constipation. Ignoring the urge to pass stool over a long period can result in chronic constipation. A sudden change in schedule such as travel may result in constipation. Constipation is common during pregnancy. This is due to hormonal changes during pregnancy and the growing baby putting pressure on the bowel. There is more information about the treatment of constipation in pregnancy in my article on constipation management and treatment (available in Whelehans or at www.whelehans.ie). Medicines which cause constipation include antacids with aluminium and calcium, opioid painkillers such as codeine (eg. Solpadeine®, Nurofen Plus®), antidepressants (more common in older antidepressants such as amitriptyline), anti-epilepsy medication (e.g. phenytoin), blood pressure medication (e.g. amlodipine, doxazosin), iron supplements and diuretics used for heart disease and high blood pressure (e.g. frusemide). Some antipsychotic medication (e.g. Risperidone) may cause constipation by causing a condition called megacolon (enlarged colon). Paradoxically, long term use of stimulant laxatives causes secondary constipation by causing "lazy bowel". Stimulant laxatives include over the counter medicines such as bisacodyl (Dulcolax®) and senna (Senokot®). They increase intestinal motor activity.

They are meant for short term use and excessive use will cause side effects, including low potassium levels, protein loss from intestines, and salt overload. Overuse is common in Ireland, especially among the elderly population. This leads to a vicious circle. This is because as long term use makes the constipation worse, people end up using more and exacerbating the problem. They are safe if used occasionally for a maximum of a few days at a time. Osmotic laxatives such lactulose syrup (Duphalac®) are safer alternatives for constipation and are safe for long term use.

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 and chronic daily headache

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. 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.

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. Because of the serious health consequences of codeine overuse, strict new regulations were introduced to pharmacies in 2010 to limit the sale of codeine based medicines. 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®. There is no benefit of taking over the counter medicines with codeine.

Alcohol

Mixing alcohol with certain medicines can cause nausea and vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting, or loss of coordination. It also can cause internal bleeding, heart problems, and difficulties in breathing when taken with certain medicines. In addition to these dangers, alcohol can make a medication less effective or even useless, or it may make the medication harmful or toxic to your body. This is the case for many over the counter (OTC) medicines as well as prescription medicines. Examples of OTC medicines which should not be taken with alcohol include many cold and flu remedies. Many cold and flu remedies such as Benylin® contain antihistamines (eg. Diphenhydramine). These can cause drowsiness and in some cases confusion, delirium and even blackouts when taken with alcohol. Other antihistamines used for allergies and hayfever such as chlorphenamine (Piriton®) have a similar effect with alcohol. Some cough mixtures containing ingredients like dextromethorpan for dry coughs can also cause drowsiness and delirium with alcohol (eg) Robitussin Dry Cough Mixture®. Alcohol can also exacerbate drowsiness with codeine based painkillers. It can cause stomach ulcers and stomach bleeding when taken with ibuprofen (Nurofen®). Paracetamol used within its recommended dosage is a very safe painkiller. Over use of paracetamol can however cause liver problems. Mixing alcohol with paracetamol on a regular basis can accelerate 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.

Heart Complaints and blood pressure

Popular anti inflammatory painkiller ibuprofen (Nurofen®) can lead to fluid retention, high blood pressure and an increased risk of heart attack and stroke in those already at risk. It can affect the ability of the blood to clot which is dangerous for people prone to brain haemorrhages. Ibuprofen should be avoided in people taking prescription medication to prevent blood clots such as aspirin, warfarin or clopidogrel (Plavix®, Clodel®). This is because ibuprofen increases the blood thinning effects of these medicines so can cause dangerous bleeds including internal bleeds. It is important to note that fish oils high in omega 3 are very beneficial to the heart and have been proven to reduce heart disease. However, fish oil supplements should be avoided while taking warfarin as they can increase the affect of warfarin and lead to bleeds. Ibuprofen can reduce the effect of blood pressure medication because ibuprofen blocks the production of prostaglandins in the body. Prostaglandins play a role in blood pressure regulation in the body so ibuprofen is best avoided when taking blood pressure medication. Decongestants such as Sudafed® and Actifed® should be avoided in people with high blood pressure and heart problems. Decongestant sprays and drops are a safer option for those with blood pressure and heart complaints as they have a local effect and less affect on blood pressure. (eg) Otrivine Nasal Spray®, Vicks Sinex Nasal Spray®. However, decongestant nasal sprays and drops cause a rebound effect if used for

longer than a week. This means that if used for longer than a week they actually make the nasal congestion worse as they start to affect normal nasal airflow. There will be no problems if you follow the recommended dosage.

Sodium

Too much sodium in your diet can increase blood pressure. People suffering from high blood pressure should consume less than 1500mg of sodium per day. You should familiarise yourself with the sodium content of the food you eat. The sodium content is found on food labels. You may be surprised at the sodium content of some foods. Foods which do not taste highly salted but which have a significant sodium content include bread, cakes, biscuits and tomato ketchup. Take away and restaurant food is often highly salted. You should get out of the habit of adding salt to your food if you have blood pressure or heart problems. Many over the counter medicines have significant sodium content. For example, Gaviscon® which is used for heart burn; Maalox® has a lower sodium content than Gaviscon® so would be a better alternative for people with high blood pressure. Soluble versions of medicines have a higher sodium content than non-soluble versions.

Kidney problems

Protein is important part of our diet as it is needed to build and repair tissue and muscle. However, people suffering from kidney impairment need to limit the amount of protein they consume. This is because when the kidneys are not working to their full potential they will not be able to excrete the byproducts of protein breakdown in the blood. Low protein diets may limit the progression of kidney disease.

Foods high in protein include red meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, nuts and some grains. Whelehans have a free dietician service in store. If you need advice on a low protein diet or on any other diet or nutrition problems, call us at 04493 34591 to book a dietician appointment.

Potassium is important for muscles to work properly, including the heart. Examples of food high in potassium include avocados, dried fruit (raisons, prunes, apricots), potatoes, bananas and oranges. Our kidneys keep our potassium levels at the correct level. However in kidney failure and impairment, your level of potassium levels may need to be restricted. Your doctor will check your potassium level when doing blood tests.

Fluid restriction may be needed with kidney disease to prevent fluid overload and associated problems such as swollen ankles and shortness of breath. Sometimes, the opposite problem occurs and people need to take extra fluid and salt. Poor appetite is a symptom of advanced kidney disease. However, it is important to eat and keep good nutrition, even if not hungry. Ibuprofen must be avoided in those with kidney problems as it can lead to worsening kidney function.

Overload of fat soluble vitamins

There are two general classes of vitamins, water soluble and fat soluble. Water soluble vitamins include the B vitamins and vitamin C. They dissolve in water and are not stored by the body.

Excess amounts are excreted in urine which means that you cannot overdose on them. They must be replaced every day in our diet to provide a continuous supply. Fat soluble vitamins include vitamin A, D, E and K. Fat-soluble vitamins are found mainly in fatty foods such as animal fats including butter and lard, vegetable oils, dairy foods, liver and oily fish. Unlike water soluble vitamins, they are not excreted when our body takes in too much, instead they can build up in fat tissues and various organs in the body such as the liver. Therefore, overdose is possible. Overdose of fat soluble vitamins is very unlikely with food alone; however some multivitamins have high levels of fat soluble vitamins. Therefore, if taking a number of vitamin supplements, always check you are not doubling up on fat soluble vitamins. A common example of inadvertent overdose of vitamin A and D is taking cod liver oil with a multivitamin. This is because cod liver oil has high levels of vitamin A and D. Instead, of taking cod liver oil with a multivitamin, you can simply take a fish oil supplement which has the benefits of omega 3 but has no vitamin A or D. For example, Whelehans own brand omega 3 supplement has no vitamin A and D but has high levels of EPA and DHA.

Vitamin A is needed for the wellbeing of our eyes, bones and reproductive organs. Signs of vitamin A toxicity include dry, itchy skin, headache, nausea, and loss of appetite. Overdose is dangerous in pregnant women as it can damage the foetus. Vitamin D helps the hardening of bones and teeth and increases the absorption of calcium. Overdose can cause nausea, weight loss and irritability. It can also damage the unborn foetus. There is however little evidence of toxicity with too much vitamin E and K.

Iron

Vitamin C helps the absorption of iron so if you must take an iron supplement for anaemia, it is a good idea to take a vitamin C supplement or a fruit high in vitamin C at the same time. Ferrograd C® is an iron supplement which contains a slow releasing iron and vitamin C. The fact it is slow releasing leads to lower incidence of side effects such as nausea and constipation. Antacids such as Rennies® and Gaviscon® can reduce the absorption of iron by up to 30 to 40%. Tea and Coffee also reduce the absorption of iron as tannins in tea and coffee bind to iron reducing its absorption. Therefore, iron supplements should be taken at a different time to antacids and tea/coffee. Iron can reduce the absorption of some prescription medication. For example it reduces the absorption of biphosphanates used for osteoporosis (eg. Fosamax®), and some commonly used antibiotics including fluorquinolones (eg. Ciprofloxacin) and tetracyclines (eg. Minocycline, Doxycycline). In fact, iron can reduce the absorption of tetracycline antibiotics by 50 to 90%. Tetracyclines are mainly used for treatment of chest infections (especially with bronchitis), acne and malaria prevention. Iron should be taken at least 3 hours apart from these medicines.

Head lice treatment

Water based treatments (e.g. Derbac M liquid®) are safer to use for asthmatics, patients with eczema, pregnant women and babies. Head lice treatments which contain alcohol can irritate sensitive skin in people with skin conditions and trigger asthma attacks in asthmatics.

Diabetic Foot

Diabetics are more prone to foot problems such as gangrene and eventual amputation. This is due to poor circulation and nerve damage caused by diabetes. The nerve damage takes away feeling in the foot; therefore diabetics may be unaware of foot problems until too late.

It is important that diabetics check their feet every day. Look carefully at the top, sides, soles, heels, and between the toes. The feet should be washed every day with lukewarm water and mild soap. Strong soaps may damage the skin. A diabetic should test the temperature of the water with their fingers or elbows before putting feet in warm or hot water. Because of diabetes, a person may not be able to sense if the water is too hot. Burns can easily occur. Gently and thoroughly dry feet, especially between toes. Feet may become very dry and may crack, possibly causing an infection. After bathing the feet, soften dry skin with lotion or cream. Whelehans Foot Cream is excellent for this as it contains deep penetrating urea. Do not put creams or lotions between toes. Care must be taken when cutting toenails because if toenails are not trimmed correctly, it may cause a foot sore or ulcer. Cut the nail straight across, because curved nails are more likely to become ingrown.

Avoid sitting with legs crossed or standing in one position for long periods of time. Wear comfortable, well-fitting shoes that have plenty of room in them. Never buy shoes that do not fit properly, hoping the shoes will stretch with time. Nerve damage may prevent the sense of pressure from improperly fitting shoes. Wear shoes made out of canvas, leather, or suede. Do not wear shoes made out of plastic, or another material that does not breathe. Do not wear thong sandals. Wear shoes that can easily adjust. They should have laces, Velcro, or buckles. Do not wear shoes with pointed or open toes, such as high heels, flip-flops, or sandals. Socks will provide an extra layer of protection between the shoe and foot.

DO NOT use antiseptic solutions on your feet because these can burn and injure skin. DO NOT apply a heating pad or hot water bottle to your feet. Avoid hot pavement or hot sandy beaches. DO NOT treat corns or calluses yourself using over-the-counter remedies. Many corn and callous treatments available in pharmacies contain salicylic acid which burns off the corn or callous, however, it can cause serious problems in diabetics. Whelehans Foot Clinic with chiropodist James Pedley takes place every Thursday. He specialises in diabetic foot care. He gives discount to medical card holders.

Breast Feeding

Many over the counter cold and flu remedies must be avoided by breast feeding mothers. Diphenhydramine, triprolidine and promethazine are the antihistamines most commonly found in cough and cold remedies. All three drugs cause drowsiness and are generally not recommended if you are breastfeeding as they may cause effects such as irritability, drowsiness or stop babies sleeping properly. Examples of products that contain antihistamines are Benylin4flu® and Uniflu® so you should avoid these.

Pseudoephedrine, phenylephrine and phenylpropanolamine are the decongestants most commonly found in cough and cold remedies. If you are breastfeeding the use of phenylephrine and phenylpropanolamine is not recommended.

Dextromethorphan is a cough suppressant commonly found in cough and cold remedies. (eg) Benylin® Non Drowsy Dry Cough and Robitussin® Dry Cough. It may be considered for occasional for breast feeding mothers with an unproductive and severe cough. However drinking plenty of fluids and inhalation treatment are considered treatments of choice. There is no research on the effects of pholcodine and codeine linctus on breast fed babies so they are not recommended in breastfeeding mothers. It is recommended to avoid guaifenesin if you are breast feeding. (eg) Exputex®, Benylin® Chesty Non Drowsy. Glycerin and honey linctus is considered safe to be taken by breastfeeding mothers.

Vitamin C is included in a number of combination cough and cold remedies and is considered safe to be taken by breastfeeding mothers. Paracetamol is a safe and effective medication for colds which can be safely used for breast feeding mothers.

It works in a number of ways including reducing aches and pains and reducing temperature and fever. The advice given here for breast feeding mothers is also true for pregnancy.

Insomnia

Certain foods and medicines can disturb sleep if taken in the evening or on a regular basis. Many people consider alcohol as an aid to sleep, however, research has shown that alcohol worsens sleep, even at low levels. Alcohol does help you get to sleep quicker as it acts as a sedative. The trouble is that alcohol affects the quality of sleep. It upsets the balance between non-REM and REM sleep, thus reducing the quality of sleep. Because of this, alcohol means your sleep is no longer refreshing. Alcohol makes you more likely to be awoken by dreams and more likely to have to go to the toilet during the night as it is a diuretic. Caffeine is a stimulant so can affect sleep. Therefore drinking tea and coffee late in the evening can affect sleep. Some over the counter cold and flu remedies and painkillers also contain caffeine so should be avoided close to bed time (eg) Panadol Extra®, Solpadeine®. Some medicines which affect sleep include beta blockers (used for high blood pressure heart conditions), corticosteroids (used for inflammatory conditions like asthma, arthritis and bronchitis), decongestants like Sudofed ®, some anti-depressants, theophyline (used for asthma) and thyroid hormones. Withdrawing from some drugs such as antidepressants and benzodiazepines can affect sleep temporarily. Diuretics which are used for heart conditions should be taken in the morning as if taken in the evening it will cause you to have to get up during the night to go to the toilet. Eating big meals late at night and fatty food such as take-aways can affect sleep. Foods containing tyramine such as cheese and chocolate stimulate the brain and cause vivid dreams and nightmares which can disturb sleep.

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. 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.

More help and information

More information on all the medical conditions mentioned in this article can be obtained in Whelehans Pharmacy. You can ask to speak to our pharmacist in private in our purpose built and private consultation room at any time. We also have additional services which you can book including a foot clinic, hearing tests (free service), dietician (free service), heart screening service (includes a cholesterol, diabetes, BP and BMI check) and a weight loss clinic. Call us at 04493 34591.