

Questions about
**MEDICATION
OVERUSE
HEADACHE**
and the answers that may
SURPRISE YOU

A booklet for people who may be
overusing painkillers to treat their migraines





WHY DO I KEEP
HAVING HEADACHES
IN BETWEEN MY
MIGRAINES?

Why don't my
painkillers work
like they used to?

Why do I wake up in the morning
with an intense headache?

You have been given this booklet because your health care provider thinks you may have medication overuse headache.

Medication overuse headache happens after taking certain painkillers too often. Sometimes this is also called *rebound headache*.

Migraine painkillers include:

- acetaminophen
- ibuprofen
- naproxen
- triptans {special migraine drugs}
- opioids

Can you tell
which one is a **FACT**,
and which one is a **MYTH**?

1. There is no limit to the number of painkillers I can use in a month to treat my headaches.
2. If I stop taking my painkillers, my headaches will get worse.

1. There is no limit to the number of painkillers I can use in a month to treat my headaches.

This is a myth.

Taking painkillers for a few days a month is safe and won't lead to overuse problems. But taking more than the monthly maximum for your headaches means your painkillers **could actually start causing headaches.**

Monthly Max Amount

A triptans* (e.g. MAXALT) or opioids (e.g. TYLENOL #3)	9 days/month
B NSAIDs (e.g. ADVIL or ALEVE) or acetaminophen (e.g. TYLENOL)	14 days/month
C if taking meds from both A and B	9 days/month

* almotriptan, eletriptan, frovatriptan, naratriptan, rizatriptan, sumatriptan, zolmitriptan

2. If I stop taking my painkillers, my headaches will get worse.

This is a fact.

Pages 8 & 9 describe options for treating medication overuse headache. One option is to stop taking painkillers.

Stopping your painkillers will **temporarily** cause your migraines to get worse. This is because your brain has been trained to expect the painkiller. It is now more sensitive to migraine attacks.

The first two weeks will likely be the worst, with more pain than your normal headache. You may also have nausea, vomiting, and trouble sleeping. This is called withdrawal. The good news is that within 4-8 weeks your headaches should start to get better.

Going through withdrawal is one way to help break the headache cycle. Turn the page to read how Lacey got her life back after she made it through withdrawal.

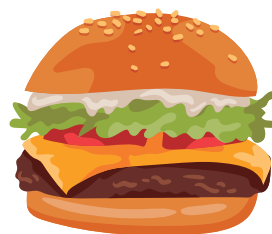
HOW COULD A DRUG THAT TREATS MY HEADACHES BE GIVING ME HEADACHES?

Imagine you are frying a burger on the grill.

You might feel grateful for the heat coming off the grill. It is cooking your burger just the right way.

But let's say you leave the burger on the grill for too long. Now it's black and charred and not what you wanted at all.

A reasonable amount of heat gives you a good burger.



Similarly, a reasonable amount of painkillers gives you good migraine relief.



But too much heat makes your burger uneatable.



But too many painkillers makes your brain more sensitive to migraines.





Lacey's Story:

I began getting migraines during puberty. Typically they were left-sided, and sometimes with an aura*. My family doctor put me on rizatriptan (**MAXALT**), and later frovatriptan (**FROVA**). Usually my migraines either came when I ovulated or during my periods.

About four years ago, I started getting more migraines. Instead of 5 per month, I was having 10 per month. I was put on propranolol every day to prevent migraines, and that helped. But then during a routine surgery they noticed a problem with my heart rhythm. I was sent to a heart specialist and he said that I had to stop my propranolol.

After I stopped propranolol, my migraines increased. I was prescribed tramadol, Tramacet, naproxen, Tylenol #3, a sumatriptan injection, and frovatriptan. A few months later, I was having 20-24 migraines per month. **I thought, "What is happening?"** I would take a medication and feel good for 3 or 4 hours, and then all of a sudden it was like someone had taken a frying pan and hit me in the side of the head. The medications would wear off. So I would take another dose.

I was stuck in bed all the time. But I was on the wait list to see a pharmacist who specialized in migraines. When the pharmacist called, he went through all my medications and got a complete history. He thought **I was having rebound headache from my medications.**

I'd never heard of headache drugs causing a headache! When someone tells you a medicine is doing more harm than good, you kind of look at them sideways. And then I started to think about the timeline. And yes, **ever since I had started to use more short-term medications, my headaches had gotten worse. It started to make sense.**

My pharmacist said, **"Can you stop all your medications for one month?"**

At this point, my life sucked. I couldn't travel. I couldn't do my job. I couldn't go for walks in the sun. I was stuck at home. This wasn't living. **I said, "What do I have to lose?"**

They warned me it would be a terrible month. That I would hate my pharmacist, that I would hate myself. But I put all my medications in a

I got my life back

bag and gave it to my roommate, and said: "Do not give these to me. Even if I'm crawling, crying, begging." If I was going to suffer by stopping all these medications, I only wanted to do it once.

The first two weeks of withdrawal were especially terrible. I would break down crying with pain. I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to end up at the hospital. But I'm so glad I did it. Because **I got my life back.**

After the withdrawal, I was super happy. I was getting migraines half as often as before. Then my pharmacist started me on magnesium, coenzyme Q10, and Vitamin B2. A few months later I was all the way back to 4-5 predictable migraines per month. I am so thankful. It's been life-changing.

Having migraines was my way of life. I didn't know any different. When you're in a routine, you accept it. **You don't realize how much better things can be.**

* An aura is a warning sign that some people have, which tells them a migraine is coming.
Lacey's name has been changed to protect her identity.

LACEY'S TIPS & ADVICE

I used my menstrual cycle app as my migraine diary, so I could track my progress.

Even if you've tried quite a few things (like I had), there are probably still medications you haven't tried. I couldn't believe my migraines could be cut in half. I thought I had tried everything.

I learned what my migraine triggers were so I could avoid them. For me, if I have a latte, the caffeine will give me a migraine right away.

Yes, withdrawal is uncomfortable. But you're uncomfortable now! What's the difference? Why not go through short term pain so that life can be better in the long run?

HOW IS MEDICATION OVERUSE HEADACHE TREATED?

The goals are:

- ➔ to have fewer than 15 headache days per month
- ➔ to use a safe number of painkillers each month (see page 4 for limits).

One strategy is to stop the painkillers that are causing the problem. Another strategy is to start a medication that helps **prevent** migraines. Some patients decide to do both at the same time.



When you stop your painkillers, you will likely feel worse before you feel better. Your health care provider may prescribe **medications to be used for a few days or weeks to help you feel more comfortable.** These may include naproxen, prednisone, or medications to treat nausea.

CAUTION:

If you are currently taking opioids (e.g. **TYLENOL #3**) or barbiturates (e.g. **FIORINAL**), do not stop them cold turkey, as withdrawal pain can be extreme. Gradually stopping is best.

3 STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

Talk with your health care provider to see which option may work best for you:

OPTION 1 Stop painkillers cold turkey



No need to start any new medications.

Headaches will get worse at first.



OPTION 2 Start prevention medication

as headaches decrease, painkillers are needed less



May be able to avoid withdrawal.

You may have to manage the cost & side effects of a new medication.



OPTION 3 Stop painkillers & start prevention medication at the same time



May give the best chance of success.

Your headaches will get worse at first, and you may have to manage the cost & side effects of a new medication.



WHAT IF I'VE ALREADY TRIED EVERYTHING TO PREVENT MIGRAINES?

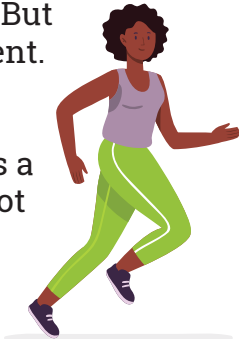
Don't give up hope yet.

Lacey (page 7) thought she had tried everything for her migraines. She was surprised to learn there were still more options to explore.

10+ PREVENTIVE OPTIONS

There are over 10 different families of prevention medications to choose from.

Sometimes it may take 4 or 5 (or even more) tries to find the medication that works well for you. It can be discouraging when a medication either doesn't work, or causes side effects. But stay persistent. Think of preventing migraines as a marathon, not a sprint.



Medications for migraines need to be at the right dose.

Medications are usually started at low doses to help avoid side effects. Then the dose should be increased over time.



If the dose stays too low, you may never know if the medication works or not.

It is important not to give up on a medication too soon.

Medications to prevent migraines take a while to start working. Typically, 2-3 months are needed before knowing how well a medication may work.



WHAT ELSE CAN I DO TO HELP WITH MY MIGRAINES?

DON'T SKIP MEALS



REDUCE STRESS



GET ENOUGH SLEEP



KNOW YOUR FOOD TRIGGERS



(e.g. alcohol, refined sugars, caffeine)

DRINK ENOUGH WATER



Find out what your triggers are, and avoid them.

KEEP A HEADACHE DIARY

so you'll know if your headaches are getting better



Used with permission of Migraine Canada
Headache diary 3 months

DOWNLOAD on www.migrainecanada.org
Want an APP? migrainetracker.ca
Filling a diary is the best way to make the right decisions about your migraines.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
Headache																															
0 1 2 3*																															
Period																															
Preventive Meds																															
Tx:																															
Tx:																															
Tx:																															
Effect of medication																															

CONSIDER NON-DRUG WAYS THAT MAY HELP YOU...

- Physical therapy or exercise
- Relaxation techniques such as mindfulness
- Psychotherapy including cognitive behavioral therapy



Are you using painkillers for headaches
most days of the month?

Have you noticed your
painkillers don't work as well as they used to?

Do you seem to be having
more headaches now than in the past?

LOOK INSIDE FOR:

- facts and myths
- a true patient story
- how to decrease your headaches in the long run
- and more

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