

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](http://www.ihe.ca/research-programs/hta/aagap/headache).**