

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

Putting pain in its place

The National Prescribing Service (NPS) was established in Australia over 10 years ago to help people (including health professionals – doctors, pharmacists, nurses and dentists) make better decisions about medicines.

Earlier this year the NPS initiated a campaign to ensure the best possible use of medicines to treat pain. The NPS website (www.nps.org.au) has more information.

We've all suffered pain; and pain relievers are probably the single most commonly used group of medicines. But pain is very much an individual problem. We all respond differently to stimuli that might cause pain; and in fact each one of us can respond differently to the same painful stimulus at a different time and under different circumstances. All this can make pain a difficult prospect to manage.

The characteristics of pain vary according to the source of the pain. That is: the pain might be sharp or stinging, dull and throbbing, or cramping pain; depending on whether the skin, the bones and joints or the internal organs are affected.

Then there is neuropathic pain. It's often described as tingling, burning, shooting or electric-type pain and it's triggered by some dysfunction in the nervous system. Causes of neuropathic pain include post herpetic neuralgia (shingles pain), uncontrolled blood glucose levels (diabetes) and nerve damage from accident or surgery.

Of course, there are a number of pain relievers from which to choose. The decision as to which is best will depend on a variety of factors: the type of pain, the cause, the severity, the duration, medication already taken for pain relief, medication currently taken for other conditions, the age of the patient and the likelihood of side effects or interactions. Make sure before you select a pain reliever - whether for yourself or a family member - you discuss these issues with your pharmacist.

Remember there is no medication which is entirely risk free.

Paracetamol is most often the first choice for mild to moderate pain. An adequate dose (up to 4 grams per day) is essential for the product to work effectively. Sometimes, particularly for chronic pain (as in osteoarthritis) the dose taken is insufficient or too infrequent. Pain in older people is too often under-reported or under-treated resulting in unnecessary suffering.

Remember, however, many combination cough/cold products and prescription medicines also contain paracetamol. So, make sure you tell your pharmacist if you are taking any other medicines to ensure there is no risk of overdose.

The non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs) available without prescription - aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen and diclofenac - can be especially useful for mild to moderate pain where inflammation is an aggravating factor. To reduce the possibility of side effects, the lowest effective dose should be used for the shortest time necessary.

Products containing opioids are used for strong pain relief when other pain relievers cannot control the pain or cannot be used. Opioids are effective but must be used carefully.

Effective treatment of neuropathic pain almost always requires prescription medications. Local anaesthetics, antidepressants and antiepileptic medicines are variously used to enhance pain relief.

The benefits of non-medication treatment of pain should always be considered. Therapies such as acupuncture, massage, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), hot and cold packs and individually tailored exercise from a physiotherapist might all be useful. And the use of complementary medicines in treating certain painful conditions is occasionally recommended. But remember these products still have the potential for side effects and drug interactions.

Whatever the cause of your pain, and however discomforting or disabling, you can get some great advice by way of the series of "fact cards" available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's (PSA) Self Care health information. There is one simply titled *Pain Relievers*; and there are also specific cards on *Opioid Pain Relievers*, *Arthritis* (both osteo and rheumatoid), *Back Pain*, *Gout*, *Headache*, *Migraine*, *Period Pain* and *Sprains and Strains*.

Checkout the PSA website at www.psa.org.au for the nearest location.