



PATIENT INFORMATION

Medication overuse Headache

Medication-overuse headache (previously called rebound headache or medication-misuse headache) is a cause of frequent or daily headaches. It is caused by taking painkillers or triptan medicines very regularly for headaches or migraine. The treatment is to stop the painkillers or triptan.

After stopping the painkillers or triptan, you are likely to have worse and more frequent headaches or migraines for a week or so, although sometimes it can be longer. However, the frequency of headaches or migraines should then gradually return to a normal pattern.

The problem of medication-overuse headache is particularly associated with taking medication for headache. If the medication is being used for something else, the same effect is not seen, unless you are a headache-prone person.

This may relate to the sensitivity of your headache 'pain sensors'. If these are already extra-sensitive, they may then be more likely to be stimulated by medication to become more sensitive still.

You must stop the painkillers or triptan completely to cure the problem. It is best to plan a day to stop them altogether rather than try to cut down gradually (unless you are taking a high dose of an opiate medication such as codeine when you will need to cut down slowly).

You are likely to experience withdrawal symptoms, usually for between 2-10 days - particularly an initial worsening of headache, but also some or all of:

- Feeling sick (nausea)
- Poor sleep
- Restlessness
- Tummy upset or diarrhoea
- Anxiety

If an anti-inflammatory painkiller is **not** the cause of the medication headache, then your doctor may advise a short course of an anti-inflammatory painkiller. This may ease headaches after stopping the painkiller which caused them.

If medication overuse is the only cause of the headache, then your headaches should cease completely after the withdrawal headache period.

If there is another underlying headache process, then after the withdrawal period your headaches should be reduced or returned to their previous pattern. Preventative medication for the original, baseline headache management may be started, either after the withdrawal period or in some cases prior to withdrawal.