

Headache and medications

Medications are designed to act upon an intended target in the body, such as a diseased organ. However, other areas in the body can also be affected. Unwanted side effects or adverse reactions are possible with all drugs, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs, herbal preparations and vitamin pills. Some medications, such as birth control pills, may cause or contribute to headache and migraine as a side effect. If you believe that medications may be giving you recurring headache, it is important to consult with your doctor. In many cases, a different medication can be prescribed.

Painkillers and 'rebound' headache

The causes of recurring headache can be many and varied, with multiple factors working in combination. Rather than address the causes, it may seem easier to take painkilling medications, such as aspirin. However, taking more than three doses of painkillers per week could be worsening your predicament. Once the painkillers wear off, the headache returns since the triggers remain. If you then take more painkillers, the cycle of relief and rebounding headache continues, prompting you to take ever-increasing amounts of medication.

Birth control pills

There is evidence that headache might be influenced by the sex hormone oestrogen, which could explain why more women than men suffer from migraine. The combined oral contraceptive pill can either improve or worsen a woman's headache. If one brand of pill gives you a migraine for the first time, or if the frequency or severity of your headache increases, change brands after consultation with your doctor. Usually, another brand of birth control pill can be taken with less risk of headache.

Hormone replacement therapy

For some women, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) worsens their headaches. Researchers believe that small fluctuations in synthetic oestrogen may be to blame. See your doctor, who can alter your treatment.

Reducing the risks

Suggestions on reducing the risk of medication induced headache include:

- Follow the dosage directions on the label
- Don't mix prescription medications with other drugs, such as alcohol
- Avoid dependence on painkillers
- Report any side effects or unusual symptoms to your doctor immediately.

Advise your doctor

If you suspect that your medication may be causing headache, it is important to tell your doctor. There may be similar medications that can give you the desired therapeutic effects without any associated headache. Sometimes, alternative treatments may be necessary.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Neurologist
- Chemist.

Things to remember

- Some medications can cause headache as an unwanted side effect.
- Drugs that may contribute to headache include oral contraceptives, some antibiotics and medications for diabetes.
- Always tell your doctor if you experience or suspect medication induced headache.

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