

## When Medicine Makes Headaches Worse

Headaches, like any chronic pain, can ruin your life. They can be responsible for depression, failures in relationships, not performing your job well, not being as good a mother or father as you could be. This can all end up in divorce, unemployment, or even suicide. Its not a matter which should be ignored. If you have chronic headaches, don't give up, someone some where knows how to manage it.

Many daily headache sufferers are actually making the problem worse by turning to painkillers at the first sign of a headache. If you find yourself popping pills more than twice a week, you could be causing rebound headaches -- but you can stop this vicious cycle.



For many of us, it's a natural response: you have a headache, so you take a few painkillers. If the pain comes back, you repeat as necessary. Though that may be fine for a day or two, taking headache pills any more than that can have unexpected and serious consequences. In fact, overusing painkillers can perpetuate headaches, making them return as soon as the medication wears off. And when the pain comes back, the natural response is to take more painkillers -- maybe the worst thing you could do.

To break the cycle, you must stop taking the medication. However, that can cause days, weeks, or even months of agonizing symptoms, including headaches and fatigue. It often requires other medications to help you get through it. Who knew that the innocent-looking, little bottle in your medicine cabinet could cause all that?

According to surveys, about 4% in the U.S. suffer from daily headaches, and Timothy R. Smith, MD, estimates that a good number of that group have rebound headaches, also called medication overuse headaches.



Michael Smith, Medical Director of the Ryan Headache Center in St. Louis, says though experts still don't know exactly what causes rebound headaches, the regular overuse of pain medication can cause physiological changes and lower serotonin, an important chemical related to pain and depression. Using too much of a painkiller seems to lower a person's pain threshold so that they begin to require painkillers to feel "normal."



Part of the problem with rebound headaches is that they are sometimes difficult to identify, especially since people with rebound headaches usually had chronic headaches to begin with (which is precisely why they started to take medication). Noticing the shift from a migraine headache to a rebound headache may be difficult for patient and doctor alike.

However, the symptoms can be somewhat different. The nausea and sensitivity to light that are typical with migraine headaches are usually absent in rebound headaches, and the pain can be anywhere on the head.



To overcome rebound headache, you need to wean yourself off of the pain medication, whether it is prescription or over-the-counter. This may be a very difficult job because you are going to have to endure some very bad days while your body adjusts to being without the medication. When we ask you to do this, there are some substitutes for the pain medication, that can help you over this rough time. It will hurt for a while but in the end it is worth it.

However, you may notice that the warning on the bottle of aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen says that you can take the medication for up to ten days. "Surely, the warning couldn't be wrong."



"That suggestion is fine for pain *other* than headache pain. For shoulder or knee pain or something like that, you can take the medication for a longer time. For headache, however, you cannot do this because you run the risk of creating rebound headaches. Therefore, for an occasional headache, you can take a pain pill, but for frequent headache you better find someone who can find out what is causing your headache.

