

MEDICATION OVERUSE HEADACHES (REBOUND HEADACHES)

Medications used to reduce headache pain can be prescription or “over-the-counter” purchased at most stores and pharmacies. When these medications are used on a daily or near-daily basis, they may actually cause more harm than good. While they may decrease the intensity of the pain for a few hours, they can feed into the pain system in such a way that further chronic headaches may result. This phenomenon is called medication overuse headache, or rebound headaches.

WHAT DO MEDICATION OVERUSE HEADACHES FEEL LIKE?

These headaches may feel like a dull, tension-type headache or may feel like a more severe migraine-like headache sensation. Other medications taken to treat the headaches may not be effective if these pain medications are being overused. Medication overuse headaches can occur with most medications but are more likely with products containing caffeine or butalbital.

WHAT CAN I DO TO STOP MEDICATION OVERUSE HEADACHES?

Unless the overused pain medications are completely discontinued, the chronic headache is likely to continue. Typically when the pain medications are discontinued, the headache may get worse for several days and the stomach may become upset. However, after a period of three to five days (sometimes longer), these symptoms begin to improve. Preventive medication will likely be needed to reduce the need for pain medication. Most patients are able to stop the headache pain medications at home, but some find it difficult and may require hospitalization. If you are overusing your headache pain medications, please talk to your neurology provider about a plan of care to reduce or stop these medications.

WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT MEDICATION OVERUSE HEADACHES?

The American Academy of Neurology (AAN) recommends the following guide:

- Over-the-counter medication: Use less than 15 days per month.
- Narcotic type medication: Use less than 10 days per month
- Triptan type medication: Use less than 10 days per month
- Ergotamine type medication: Use less than 10 days per month
- Any combination of headache medication types above: Use less than 10 days per month