When an area of the body is damaged or stressed, nerves from the affected area carry a message to the brain, which we call pain. Pain is an unpleasant sensation or feeling that may be mild or severe, sharp or dull, and acute or chronic.

**Acute pain**
Acute pain is pain that starts suddenly and lasts for a short time. It may be mild or severe and may last a few minutes, hours, days or weeks. The cause of acute pain is usually known. Causes include bites, burns, headaches, broken bones and surgery.

**Chronic pain**
Chronic pain is pain that occurs on most days of the week for longer than 3 months. It can be due to a long-lasting medical condition (e.g. arthritis, cancer), or it can be pain that continues long after healing has occurred. Sometimes the cause of a person’s chronic pain cannot be found.

Pain that continues after healing may be due to changes in the nervous system.

**Medicines for pain relief**
Pain-relieving medicines don’t always stop all pain, but can reduce pain to a level that does not affect daily life. There are a number of different types of pain relievers that suit different types of pain. The choice of a pain reliever and how well it reduces the pain depend on a number of things including:

- a person’s age, medical condition(s) and other medicines
- the type of pain, where it occurs and how strong it is
- the form of pain reliever - pain relievers are available in different forms including soluble tablets, immediate-release tablets, slow-release tablets, mixtures, injections, creams, gels and patches
how often the pain reliever is used - sometimes it is better to use pain relievers at regular intervals ‘by the clock’, rather than ‘as needed’.

**Non-prescription pain relievers**

Some pain relievers do not need to be prescribed by a doctor. You can buy them, and get advice about their use, from a pharmacy. Non-prescription medicines that can relieve pain include paracetamol, some anti-inflammatory pain relievers and some complementary medicines.

**Paracetamol**

Paracetamol:
- can relieve mild or moderate pain
- (e.g. headache, muscle and joint pain)
- can reduce fever
- is suitable for all ages
- has a low risk of side effects and other problems when used as directed.

Paracetamol is available as tablets, capsules, mixtures and suppositories.

**Anti-inflammatory pain relievers**

Anti-inflammatory pain relievers can cause serious side effects if used in high doses and/or for too long. Check with a pharmacist or doctor before using anti-inflammatory pain relievers especially if you:
- are sensitive to aspirin
- are pregnant or trying to become pregnant
- have asthma, high blood pressure or heart, kidney, liver or stomach problems
- take a medicine or have a medical condition that affects blood clotting
- take any other medicines
- have recently had or will be having surgery or dental work
- have a muscle or joint injury.

Always use the lowest dose of anti-inflammatory pain relievers that relieves your symptoms. If you need to use them for more than a few days, get medical advice. Stop taking anti-inflammatory pain relievers and get medical advice if you have swollen ankles, breathing problems, unexplained bruising or bleeding, heartburn, black faeces or coffee-coloured vomit.
Combination products

- Some products contain combinations of pain relievers (e.g. paracetamol plus ibuprofen), or pain relievers combined with other medicines (e.g. cold and flu products, some migraine products). Always check the ingredients of combination products, to avoid taking an overdose of pain relievers.
- Some paracetamol products contain caffeine, which may increase the pain-relieving effect of paracetamol. If you want to use these products, ask a pharmacist for advice before using other products containing caffeine (e.g. tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks, chocolate).

Prescription pain relievers

If your pain is not controlled by a non-prescription pain reliever, you may need a different type of pain-relieving medicine. A doctor can prescribe stronger pain relievers and medicines for nerve pain. Stronger pain relievers may be opioids such as codeine, tramadol, oxycodone, and morphine. Medicines for nerve pain include amitriptyline, pregabalin, gabapentin, and duloxetine.

Self care

- Check with a pharmacist or doctor if you need to use a pain reliever for more than 3 days in a row.
- Read all medicine labels and follow the directions.
- Do not take more than the recommended dose of a pain reliever. Give children the correct dose for their age and weight, according to the instructions on the label.
- Do not take pain relievers to continue working or playing sport when injured.
- Avoid alcohol when you are using an opioid pain reliever.
- Remember that pain can also be reduced by non-medicine means (e.g. hot/cold packs, physiotherapy, TENS, relaxation, massage, exercise, correct posture). Ask a doctor, pharmacist or physiotherapist for advice.
- Use relaxation techniques to manage stress – especially if stress brings on pain such as headache.
- Alert your doctor, dentist and pharmacist if you are taking pain relievers regularly.

Important

Always ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice about the best pain reliever for your pain, and about the best way to use it. Using pain relievers the wrong way can be harmful.
- High doses or constant use of some pain relievers can lead to serious kidney, liver or stomach damage.
- Daily use of codeine and other opioid pain relievers can cause physical and psychological dependence (addiction).
- Some pain relievers interact with other medicines.
- Repeated use of pain relievers for headaches can cause medication overuse headache.
- Aspirin may cause serious side effects in children. It should not be used by children under 16 years of age unless advised by a doctor.
For more information

**Australian Pain Management Association**
- Pain Link telephone helpline: 1300 340 357
- Website: www.painmanagement.org.au

**Chronic Pain Australia**
- Website: www.chronicpainaustralia.org.au

**Painaustralia**
- Website: www.painaustalia.org.au

**Healthdirect Australia**
- Phone: 1800 022 222
- Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

**NPS MedicineWise Medicines Line**
- Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
- Website: www.nps.org.au

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**
- Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets

**The Poisons Information Centre**
- In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia

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**Related Fact Cards**

- Back pain
- Children’s pain and fever
- Chronic pain
- Constipation
- Gout
- Headache
- Migraine
- Opioids for pain relief
- Osteoarthritis
- Period problems
- Relaxation techniques
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Sprains and strains
- Wise use of medicines

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**Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.**