

# Painkillers and the liver

**A** common question for many people with hepatitis C is whether over-the-counter pain killers (or analgesics) are harmful to the liver. For most painkillers, when taken according to their directions, the answer is no. But there are exceptions. Liver disease as a result of hepatitis C progresses in different ways for people. It is important that you know whether or not you have liver disease and to get advice from your doctor before taking over-the-counter medication. A person with hepatitis C and significant liver disease may be given very different medical advice than a person with hepatitis C and no liver disease. People with hepatitis C should always check with their doctor before taking over-the-counter pain killers or other drugs.

## Paracetamol

Paracetamol relieves mild to moderate pain and lowers body temperature in patients with fever. Paracetamol is generally regarded as safe with relatively few side effects when used in its normal recommended dose.

However, continued use of paracetamol over a long period, or in high doses over shorter periods can be harmful. Paracetamol can cause acute liver damage especially in people with excessive alcohol intake, people with advanced liver disease (such as cirrhosis), or people with kidney disease.

## Aspirin

Aspirin relieves mild to moderate pain and treats fever. It has an anti-inflammatory effect and reduces swelling and inflammation.

Aspirin can increase bleeding time because of its effect on blood coagulation (clotting). This effect will continue for about 4 to 7 days after stopping aspirin use. If you are on treatment for hepatitis C, pegylated interferon can also affect blood coagulation and so aspirin should be taken with caution. Care is also

needed when using aspirin in the later stages of liver disease, such as cirrhosis, or if blood coagulation is abnormal.

Taken in high doses aspirin can cause liver damage. If you are having a liver biopsy, check to see if you need to stop taking aspirin because of the increased risk of bleeding.

## Ibuprofen

Ibuprofen is a non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory drug used to treat pain, fever and inflammation.

As with aspirin, ibuprofen prolongs blood coagulation and should be used with caution by people in the later stages of liver disease or on hepatitis C treatment. The affect on bleeding time is reversible and only lasts as long as the drug is circulating in the bloodstream.

A rare side effect of non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen is significant damage to liver cells. This can occur if Ibuprofen is used frequently during the initial phase of treatment for hepatitis C.

## Codeine

Codeine is available in combination with other medicines such as paracetamol. These are classified as restricted medicines and are only sold in pharmacies under the supervision of a pharmacist. In people with liver disease, the effects of codeine can be prolonged and caution is advised.

## Summary

Aspirin, codeine, ibuprofen and other non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory drugs should only be used after consulting your doctor.

Paracetamol is probably the safest pain killer for people with hepatitis C. However, it should only be taken at normal dosages for short-term pain relief and not in conjunction with alcohol.

Consult your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medication and also if you require pain medication for something other than occasional and/or

temporary pain.

## **Useful contacts**

### ***Hepatitis Victoria***

Hepatitis Infoline 1800 703 003

Office telephone: (03) 9380 4644

Email: [info@hepvic.org.au](mailto:info@hepvic.org.au)

Web: [wwwvic.org.au](http://wwwvic.org.au)

### ***Medicines Line***

Telephone: 1300 888 763

### ***Nurse on Call***

1300 606 024

This infosheet is intended as a general guide only. It is not intended to replace expert or medical advice.

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