

Managing chronic pain

If you suffer from chronic pain it's time to speak to your doctor or pharmacist about reviewing your pain management plan.

On 1 May changes came into effect that impact how codeine is sold in Australia. Notably, over-the-counter pain relief products containing codeine (e.g. Nurofen Plus, Panadeine) are now only available directly from a pharmacist and pack sizes have been reduced to five-day quantities. To access large pack quantities you will need a prescription from your doctor.

A number of people who suffer chronic pain caused by arthritis use over-the-counter products to manage break-through pain. Over time this can create dependency and people may use more medicine than is recommended or not gain adequate relief from the medicines.

Research conducted by Arthritis NSW in 2007 found 79% of respondents who said they were taking over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medicines (2650 people) had been doing so for more than two years.

CEO of the National Prescribing Service, Dr Lynn Weekes, said taking more than the recommended maximum amount of pain relief containing codeine can result in serious side effects. Overuse or misuse of products containing aspirin or ibuprofen can result in gastric ulcer perforation, and in products containing paracetamol it can result in liver toxicity and death.

"Up to now pain relief products containing codeine have been freely available in pharmacies. This has led to some misuse of these products and can cause serious health problems," Dr Weekes said.

Every medicine contains an active ingredient, which is what gives the medicine its therapeutic effect. Most medicines are known by their brand name rather than the active ingredient, which can become confusing as some products are known as several different brands.

"Some people who have been using these pain relief products may not even realise they contain codeine. This is why it's important to get to know the active ingredient in any medicine you take and ensure it's the most suitable product for you by talking to your doctor or pharmacist."

To learn the active ingredient in your medicine, the NPS has created an online tool called the Medicine Name Finder. When a brand name is entered into the NPS Medicine Name Finder, the active ingredient name appears and vice versa when the active ingredient name is entered. You are then prompted to record your medicine details on a downloadable [Medicines List](#) or print the information to discuss it with your doctor. A link is also provided to the [Consumer Medicine Information \(CMI\)](#) leaflet which contains more details about the medicine.

Dr Weekes said changes to the availability of codeine will help health professionals – particularly pharmacists – identify and support people who need help to manage their pain more effectively and safely.

"Some people don't like to admit their condition has deteriorated, that their medicines aren't working, or they don't like going to the doctor so they turn to over-the-counter products. However if pain isn't being managed properly there might be alternate medicines or non-medicine treatments you could try. Talk to your doctor – don't try to ignore or hide from pain," Dr Weekes said.

For more information about codeine go to www.nps.org.au/news_and_media/position_statements/codeine