



Australian Government

Department of Health

Therapeutic Goods Administration

Codeine-containing medicines

Harms and changes to patient access

What's changing?

From 1 February 2018, medicines that contain codeine will no longer be available without prescription.

Your pharmacist will be able to help you choose from a range of effective products that do not require a prescription. If you have strong or chronic (long-lasting) pain you will need to consult your doctor, and if medicines are part of your treatment, a prescription may be needed.

Why is access to codeine changing?

Some Australians don't realise how much harm codeine can cause.

Most Australians are unaware that over-the-counter medicines containing codeine for pain relief offer very little additional benefit when compared with medicines without codeine. The use of such medicines, however, is associated with high health risks, such as developing tolerance or physical dependence on codeine.

Codeine is an opioid drug closely related to morphine and, like morphine, is derived from opium poppies. Codeine can cause opioid tolerance, dependence, addiction, poisoning and in high doses, death.

Codeine use can be harmful

Tolerance occurs when codeine becomes less effective and so the body needs higher and higher doses to feel the same relief from your symptoms. **Severe withdrawal symptoms** can result when the medicine is stopped; these include **head and muscle aches, mood swings, insomnia, nausea and diarrhoea**. Some of these withdrawal symptoms, such as head or muscle aches mimic the symptoms that low-dose codeine products are often used to treat, leading to people incorrectly continuing to take the medicine longer or in higher doses.

Codeine poisoning contributes to both accidental and intentional deaths in Australia. The codeine-containing medicines that are currently available over-the-counter are usually combined with either paracetamol or ibuprofen. Regular use of medicines containing codeine, for example for chronic pain, has led to some consumers becoming addicted or tolerant to codeine without realising it. Taking more than the recommended dose of combination products could result in serious side effects. Though safe at recommended doses, long term use of high doses of paracetamol can result in **liver damage** while the most severe adverse effects of long term ibuprofen use include serious **internal bleeding, kidney failure** and **heart attack**.

Codeine use can lead to tolerance, dependence, addiction, poisoning and even death

Major symptoms include:

Headache

Drowsiness

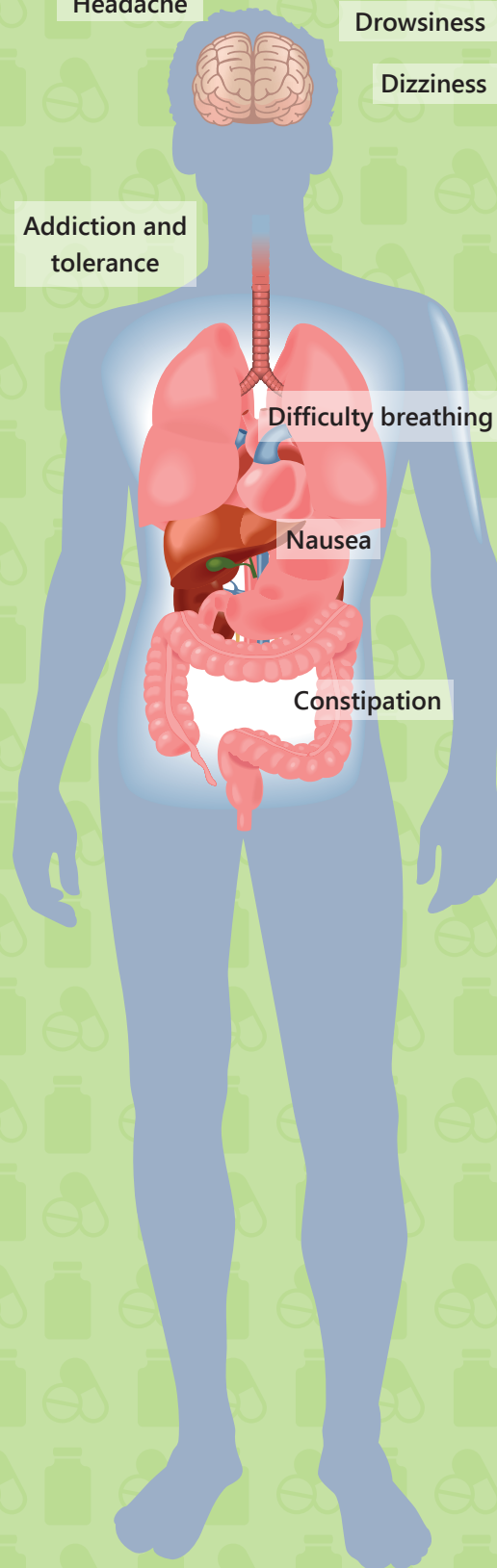
Dizziness

Addiction and tolerance

Difficulty breathing

Nausea

Constipation



Codeine is also sometimes used in medicines to relieve the symptoms of cough and cold, however there are safer and more effective medicines available that may provide relief from these conditions. Talk to your pharmacist or doctor for advice on what may be best for you.

How and where to get advice

Pharmacists have an important role to play in minimising harm from codeine.

The current range of codeine-containing over-the-counter medicines will continue to be available without a prescription in pharmacies until 31 January 2018. Pharmacists will continue to be an important source of information and advice for consumers both before and after this date.

Most people should be able to manage acute pain or cough and cold symptoms with safer medicines. For acute pain, this may include products containing paracetamol or ibuprofen, or the two products in combination. Your pharmacist will be able to provide advice on the most appropriate medicines for you. Speaking with your pharmacist is particularly important if you have any other medical conditions, such as stomach, kidney, liver or heart problems.

Talk to your doctor

People with ongoing pain should talk to their doctor or healthcare provider to determine better alternative treatment options. These may include: alternative over-the-counter or prescription medicines; non-medicine therapies from an allied health professional such as a physiotherapist; self-management tools such as exercise or relaxation; or referral to a pain specialist or pain management clinic.

Ask your doctor about a Medicare-funded care plan which will allow you access to a rebate for treatment from an allied health professional. Medicare provides a rebate for the preparation of a Chronic Disease Management Plan and a Team Care Arrangement. For more information see www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/mbsprimarycare-chronicdisease-pdf-infosheet.

If you think that you are unable to manage without codeine and experience some of the side effects of withdrawal talk to your doctor about getting help.

Next steps

A Nationally Coordinated Codeine Implementation Working Group (NCCIWG) has been established with representatives from state and territory health departments and peak professional bodies representing consumers, pharmacists and medical professionals. The purpose of this working group is to assist with the implementation of a communication strategy to help inform the community of the upcoming changes to the availability of low-dose codeine containing medicines from 1 February 2018.

Advice for pharmacists and medical professionals regarding the changes to codeine access and to help them provide the best advice to their patients will be made available on the Department's website at www.health.gov.au.

For more information and support:

NPS MedicineWise

www.nps.org.au

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

www.drugs.health.gov.au

Pain Australia

www.painaustralia.org.au

Chronic Pain Australia

www.chronicpainaustralia.org.au

painHEALTH

<https://painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au>

Australian Pain Management Association

www.painmanagement.org.au

Ask Your Pharmacist:

askyourpharmacist.com.au

Pain Management Network

www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/chronic-pain

Pain Link Helpline

1300 340 357

Healthdirect Australia - 24 Hour Health

Advice Line: 1800 022 222

Contact information for state and territory drugs and poisons units

ACT Health

Pharmaceutical Services: www.health.act.gov.au/public-information/businesses/pharmaceutical-services

NSW Ministry of Health

Pharmaceutical Services: www.health.nsw.gov.au/pharmaceutical/Pages/default.aspx

NT Department of Health

Environmental Health – Medicines and

Poisons Control: <https://health.nt.gov.au/professionals/environmental-health/medicines-and-poisons-control>

QLD Health

Medicines Regulation & Quality Unit:

www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/medicines

Poisons Management: www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/licences/medicines-poisons/poisons-management

SA Health

Medicines and Technology Policy and

Programs: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/MTPP

TAS Department of Health & Human Services

Pharmaceutical Services: www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/psbtas/welcome

VIC Department of Health & Human Services

Drugs and Poisons Regulation: www.health.vic.gov.au/dpu/

WA Health

Pharmaceutical Services: www.public.health.wa.gov.au/1/872/2/pharmaceutical_services.pm