

# HEADACHE MEDICATIONS



Chronic headaches and migraines are often treated with several types of medications with differing uses and goals. Your physician may use one medication as “rescue” therapy when you have a bad headache. For patients with very frequent headaches, a daily preventative medication may be used to reduce the frequency of headache attacks. Lastly, there are some non-prescription daily preventative medications that may be used independently or in addition to prescription preventative medication.

## Rescue medications

These medications are used at the beginning of a headache attack to stop the headache and/or reduce immediate symptoms. The earlier in the course of the headache you use these medications, the better the chance that it will resolve the headache.

- **NSAIDS** (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory) medications
  - ibuprofen (Advil<sup>®</sup>, Motrin<sup>®</sup>), naproxen (Aleve<sup>®</sup>), aspirin, diclofenac (Cambia<sup>®</sup>), ketorolac (Toradol<sup>®</sup>)
  - These medications treat headaches by reducing inflammation.
- **Triptans**
  - Sumatriptan (Imitrex<sup>®</sup>), rizatriptan (Maxalt<sup>®</sup>), naratriptan (Amerge<sup>®</sup>), zolmitriptan (Zomig<sup>®</sup>), eletriptan (Relpax<sup>®</sup>), almotriptan (Axert<sup>®</sup>) and frovatriptan (Frova<sup>®</sup>)
  - These medications have action on the serotonin neurotransmitter system. They treat headaches through their effects on serotonin receptors present on blood vessel walls.
- **Ergotamine**
  - Migranal<sup>®</sup>, IV DHE
  - These medications treat headaches through their potent vasoconstrictive effects on blood vessels.
- **Other medications:** dopamine antagonists
  - Metoclopramide (Reglan<sup>®</sup>), prochlorperazine (Compazine<sup>®</sup>)
  - These medications may be used in combination with an NSAID and /or an antihistamine like diphenhydramine (Benadryl<sup>®</sup>).
  - These medications block the dopamine receptors in the central nervous system. They treat headaches through their actions on this neurotransmitter system.
- Use of opioid medications containing hydrocodone (Vicodin<sup>®</sup>, Lortab<sup>®</sup>, Norco<sup>®</sup>) should be avoided. Use of these medications, even in the short term, has been shown to worsen headaches.

## Preventative medications

These medications are often used on a daily basis to decrease the frequency of headaches. These medications work best if taken daily and consistently.

- **Anti-epileptic medications**
  - Topiramate (Topamax<sup>®</sup>), valproic acid (Depakote<sup>®</sup>), and gabapentin (Neurontin<sup>®</sup>)
  - These medications exert effects on neurotransmitter systems within the brain that can reduce the frequency of headache over weeks to months.
- **Beta blockers**
  - Propranolol (Inderal<sup>®</sup>), nadolol (Corgard<sup>®</sup>)
  - Act on the beta receptors that line arteries, and prevents dilation of these vessels, which reduces the frequency of migraine headaches.
- **SSRI's** (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors)
  - citalopram (Celexa<sup>®</sup>), escitalopram (Lexapro<sup>®</sup>), fluoxetine (Prozac<sup>®</sup>), fluvoxamine (Luvox<sup>®</sup>), paroxetine (Paxil<sup>®</sup>), sertraline (Zoloft<sup>®</sup>)
  - Increase serotonin levels by preventing re-uptake of the neurotransmitter, which may reduce the frequency of headaches over time. May also address mild depressive symptoms that may contribute to headaches.
- **TCA's** (tricyclic antidepressants)
  - Amitriptyline (Elavil<sup>®</sup>), nortriptyline (Pamelor<sup>®</sup>)
  - Have effects on multiple neurotransmitter systems, including serotonin, norepinephrine, and NMDA that reduces the frequency of headaches over time. May also address mild depressive symptoms that may contribute to headaches.
- **Other preventatives**
  - cyproheptadine (Periactin<sup>®</sup>)
  - Serotonin and histamine antagonist

## Over-the-counter supplements

These medications may help with reduction of headaches in some patient populations. These are generally safe to use alone or in addition to prescription preventatives.

- **Riboflavin** (Vitamin B2): 200 mg once or twice a day
- **Magnesium:** 500 mg once or twice a day
- **Butterburr:** 50-150 mg daily based on age

## References and Additional Resources

<http://www.achenet.org/>  
[http://www.achenet.org/news/Kids\\_Help/](http://www.achenet.org/news/Kids_Help/)  
<http://kidshealth.org/parent/general/aches/headache.html>

