



## Migraine and Neurogenic Pain Center at PIERCEY NEUROLOGY LLC

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<http://www.pierceyneurology.com>

### Rebound Headaches

When the occasional headache strikes, most of us head for the medicine cabinet or local pharmacy and take an over-the-counter pain medication, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Motrin), aspirin, or pain-relieving drugs containing caffeine. A rebound headache may be the outcome if these medications aren't taken as directed. While over-the-counter pain-relievers are helpful in improving headache pain, they must be taken with caution because they could actually make your headaches worse if they aren't taken correctly. The overuse or misuse of pain relievers -- exceeding labeling instructions (such as taking the drug three or more days per week) or not following your doctor's advice -- can cause you to "rebound" into another headache.

When the pain medication wears off, you may experience a withdrawal reaction, prompting you to take more medication, which only leads to another headache and the desire to take more medication. And so the cycle continues until you start to suffer from chronic daily headaches with more severe headache pain and more frequent headaches. Pain reliever overuse appears to interfere with the brain centers that regulate the flow of pain messages to the nerves, worsening headache pain. In addition to the rebound headache, even over the counter pain relievers can be addicting and you may experience a more intense pain when the medication wears off than if you never took it in the first place.

This rebound syndrome is even more common if your medication contains caffeine, which is often included in many pain relievers to speed up the action of the other ingredients. While it can be beneficial, caffeine in medications, combined with consuming caffeine (coffee, tea, soft drinks or chocolate) from other sources, makes you more vulnerable to a rebound headache.

#### What Drugs Cause Rebound Headaches?

Many commonly used pain relievers, when taken in large enough amounts, can cause rebound headaches. Drugs once thought of as "safe" are turning up as the likeliest culprits. These include:

- Aspirin
- Sinus relief medications
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (such as Aleve)
- Sedatives for sleep



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- Codeine and prescription narcotics
- Over-the-counter combination headache remedies containing caffeine (such as Anacin, Excedrin)
- Ergotamine preparations (such as Cafergot, Wigraine)
- Butalbital combination pain relievers (such as Fiorinal, Fioricet)

While small amounts of these drugs per week may be safe (and effective) -- at some point, continued use can lead to the development of low grade headaches that just will not go away. Taking larger or more frequent doses of the offending medication is not only exposes the person to a higher level of the medication's harmful ingredients, but it can make the headache worse and continue indefinitely.

### **What Is the Treatment for Rebound Headaches?**

Usually, discontinuing the medication or gradually reducing the medication dose will lead to more easily controlled headaches. Some people may need to be "detoxified" under more carefully monitored medical conditions. People taking large doses of sedative hypnotics, sedative-containing combination headache pills, or narcotics such as codeine or oxycodone need to gradually taper off of these medications rather than discontinuing abruptly to avoid further complications.

Unfortunately, for many chronic daily headache sufferers, detoxification for the first several weeks leads to increasing headaches. Hang in there! Eventually, the headaches disappear and resume their previous intermittent nature.

Once you have detoxified from the daily or near daily use of rebound headache causing medication, you may use these pain relievers on a limited basis, only when necessary and as long as they are effective. Don't take a medication 'just because you feel you need to something.' Do not use them more than once or twice a week. Avoid caffeine-containing products while taking a pain relievers, especially medication that already contains caffeine.

In order to avoid going back into an overuse cycle you may be prescribed a medication that prevents headaches. The purpose of this approach is to decrease the number of headaches you have, so that when you have a headache you can more effectively treat it with 'rescue' or as needed medication.