

SAFE USE OF ANALGESICS FOR MILD PAIN



People living with a chronic illness often need to make changes to their everyday lives. The hints in this brochure are meant as a guide only. We hope that you find some of the hints or examples useful.

The safe use of analgesics is an important area for all members of the community due to their widespread availability. It is even more important for people with chronic hepatitis C, as the toxicity and activity of analgesics on the body may be altered, depending on the extent of liver damage.

OVER THE COUNTER ANALGESICS

Analgesics available over the counter for mild pain primarily consist of paracetamol, aspirin and ibuprofen.

PARACETAMOL

Paracetamol has an analgesic effect due to the inhibition of prostoglandins. When there is liver damage, one of the key enzymes involved in paracetamol metabolism is depleted, and therefore paracetamol clearance in persons with significant liver cirrhosis from hepatitis may be decreased. This means the paracetamol level in the body is raised and toxic effects may occur. However, in many people liver metabolism is satisfactory and as a result paracetamol metabolism is well maintained.

Unfortunately there is no blood test that really tests the capacity of the liver to metabolise drugs. The 'liver function tests' that look at AST, ALT and alkaline phosphatase do not reflect actual liver function, but rather are markers of liver cellular damage. These are not useful for predicting changes in drug metabolism, and our ability at present to make dosage changes based on such markers is limited.

ASPIRIN

Aspirin is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID). Its analgesic and anti-inflammatory actions are attributed to its inhibition of prostaglandin synthesis. Aspirin also exerts an effect on platelets in the blood, reducing its ability to clot. Therefore, in chronic liver disease, where the body's production of clotting factors is naturally decreased, aspirin and other NSAIDs such as ibuprofen have been shown to increase the risk of bleeding. As a result, aspirin and ibuprofen are likely to be more dangerous than paracetamol in a person with chronic hepatitis C and are therefore not the recommended treatment.

SUMMARY

In summary, paracetamol is the preferred option for analgesia in persons with chronic hepatitis C. In people with a healthy liver, the maximum recommended daily dose for paracetamol is 4g. Therefore in chronic hepatitis C, a daily dose of 3g is recommended, which is taken as two tablets of Panadol® or Panamax® three times a day. In all situations, the use of analgesics in persons with chronic hepatitis should first be discussed with your regular doctor. Because your doctor carries out regular liver function tests he/she will be in the best position to advise you on the safest use of analgesics.

Written by Michael Spartalis, B. Pharm MPS AACPA and Jennifer Evans, B. Pharm.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Australian Medicines Handbook 2000. Australian Medicines Handbook Pty Ltd, Finsbury Press: Thebarton.

Gastroenterological Society of Australia. (3rd edition). Clinical Guidelines: Hepatitis C.

Herbert, M. F. Appendix F: Guide to drug dosage in hepatic disease. In Speight, T.M. & Holford, N.H.G. (eds). (1997). Avery's Drug Treatment. 4th ed. Auckland: Adis International: 1761-1792.

Tolman, K.G. (1998). Hepatotoxicity of non-narcotic analgesics. Am J Med. 105. (S/B): 13S-19S.