

Becoming Codeine Free:

If you think you may have a Codeine addiction or are suffering rebound headaches, Hickeys Pharmacies strongly recommends that you discuss the problem with a health professional. The following guidelines have been taken from a resource called codeinefree.org.uk. These guidelines are given by way of information and should not be misconstrued as medical advice.

A few options

1. Cold Turkey
2. Taper Plan
3. Substitute Therapy

1. Cold Turkey

Stopping 'cold turkey' simply involves cutting out all the codeine containing tablets with a sudden stop rather than a by a gradual reduction. This is the fastest way to stop but harshest in the form of withdrawal effects. The effects vary from person to person and can be as easy as slight diarrhoea ranging up to a full range of withdrawal effects. Some of the effects you could experience include:-

- Headache & Migraine
- Joint and muscle aches and cramps
- Flu like symptoms
- Insomnia
- Restless legs
- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Runny nose
- Panic and anxiety
- Lethargy
- Profuse sweating
- Stomach cramps

This list is not definitive and effects vary. What one person experiences, the next may not. Also, the severity varies also. A person on a high Codeine dose may suffer fewer effects than a person on a lower dose. Reports suggest that the withdrawal effects kick in around day 2 - 3, peaking around day 7 before rapidly easing off thereafter. Using Loperamide (Imodium) can help to ease diarrhoea, warm (not hot!) lavender baths and gentle exercise can help with muscle cramps and pains. Plain paracetamol and ibuprofen can also help with headache and joint pains (be careful you are staying below the maximum daily doses of any of these medicines).

If you can confide in a partner, relative or close friend, the support that they can offer can make a world of difference.

2. Taper Plan

A taper plan or, slow taper, is a way of coming off Codeine which minimises the withdrawal side effects. The first step is to sit down and honestly work out your average daily intake of tablets.

If you are taking more than the recommended daily dose you need to talk to a doctor immediately. Because combination codeine products also contain other drugs e.g. paracetamol & ibuprofen you are also exposed to other major side-effects such as irreversible liver failure, stomach ulcers and kidney problems if you exceed the recommended dosage.

Give consideration on how quickly or slowly you want to taper down. You could drop one tablet a week, 1/2 tablet twice weekly, 1/2 tablet per week, just decide on what you are comfortable with.

On week 1 of your taper plan, take this amount of tablets spaced evenly throughout the day. How you space them out is up to you, it could be one at a time at more frequent intervals or 2 at a time at less frequent intervals. It is really up to you on how you start. Just plan it out on how you feel you could best cope.

If, after the first week, you feel settled then do your first planned drop and take this new lower amount of tablets per week. If at any time you feel unsettled or uncomfortable about taking a drop, just stay on your current level for another week.

Just **DON'T** cheat by sneaking in an extra tablet or 2. This will just make your next drop much harder. If you feel unsettled about doing your next drop, put it off for a week. It is far better to stabilise before doing a drop than risking failure by dropping when you are not ready.

If you take 8 tablets a day and want to reduce at the rate of 1 tablet/week, an example taper plan could be:-

Week 1 - 8 codeine containing tablets per day - 2 at a time, evenly spaced

Week 2 - 7 codeine containing tablets per day

Week 3 - 6 codeine containing tablets per day

Week 4 - 5 codeine containing tablets per day

Week 5 - 4 codeine containing tablets per day - Treat yourself to a reward - You deserve it!

Week 6 - 3 codeine containing tablets per day

Week 7 - 2 codeine containing tablets per day

Week 8 - 1 codeine containing tablet per day

Week 9 - Codeine Free!!!!

Obviously, the above is only a simple example and you need to give consideration to your individual circumstances. Your GP will be happy to work out a plan to suit you.

3. Substitute Therapy

Substitute therapy involves swapping combination Codeine products onto a safer alternative. As it's the paracetamol or ibuprofen which causes most damage to the body, swapping to alternatives immediately removes these potentially harmful products. This is often considered if patients are exceeding recommended daily doses of OTC products. Substitution therapy will always require the involvement of a Doctor.

Always read the instructions provided with OTC medicines and never exceed the recommended dosage.

Useful Contacts:

- Your GP
- HSE addiction services http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/Find_a_Service/Addiction_Services/
- HSE Helpline 1800 459 459 (Mon-Fri 10am-5pm)