

Medicines containing codeine

Information for dentists

What is changing?

In December 2016, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) announced the final decision that over-the-counter medicines containing low-dose codeine will become prescription only products from 1 February 2018. Codeine containing products affected include cold and flu remedies and combination analgesics, such as *Panadeine*, *Nurofen Plus* and *Mersyndol*, as well as generic brands.

Why are these changes occurring?

Research has repeatedly shown that the low dose of codeine available over-the-counter provides no more pain relief than products with paracetamol or ibuprofen alone. So, there is little need for low-dose codeine, especially when there are safer and more effective options available to help manage cold and flu symptoms and pain, both pharmacological and non-pharmacological.

In addition, because codeine is an opioid medicine in the same family as morphine, it can be highly addictive and long term regular use can lead to tolerance, dependence, toxicity and in high doses, death.

Research conducted by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales* indicated that the rate of codeine-related deaths in Australia more than doubled between 2000 and 2009, driven primarily by an increase in accidental overdoses.

Much of the toxicity from excessive use of codeine related products comes from the co-formulated ingredients, particularly paracetamol and ibuprofen. Overdose of paracetamol can result in liver damage and long term or high dose ibuprofen use can lead to internal bleeding, kidney failure, elevated blood pressure, heart attack and stroke. Evidence shows that long term use of opioids can make chronic pain worse by causing hyperalgesia.

What does this mean for dentists?

Dr Geraldine Moses, consultant pharmacist to the Australian Dental Association has advised the following: "It is anticipated that dentists will be requested to write scripts for codeine-containing medicines that are no longer available over-the-counter. To meet or refuse these requests you need to be up-to-date with codeine's safety issues, some of which are relatively new".

Therefore, given that codeine is a poor analgesic with associated harms, it is important to:

- know how to manage dental pain without reliance on opioids
- develop your practice policies for prescribing non-codeine containing medicines for pain
- understand the risks associated with long term codeine use and advise your patients
- know how to recognise dependency issues and refer the patient back to their general practitioner or local alcohol and drug service
- be aware of your obligations under the Health (Drugs and Poisons) Regulations 1996 when treating a person who you believe is drug dependent.

Where can I get more information?

- The TGA Codeine Hub: <https://www.tga.gov.au/codeine-info-hub>
- NPS Medicinewise: <https://www.nps.org.au/>
- Scriptwise: <http://www.scriptwise.org.au/codeine>

*Roxburgh, A., et. al. (2015). Trends and characteristics of accidental and intentional codeine overdose deaths in Australia, *Med J Aust*; 203 (7): 299