

Just what the doctor ordered

Relieving dental pain

Your dentist has a number of options for relieving short-term dental pain. These options can be either prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medications that you can buy in the store without a prescription. In most cases, an OTC medication or combination of OTC medications will do the trick.¹

OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICATIONS

OTC pain-relief medications include acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

Acetaminophen. Acetaminophen products, like Tylenol (Johnson & Johnson), might be a good choice if you are taking certain other medications, like those used to prevent blood clots. Acetaminophen affects blood clotting less than NSAIDs¹ and may help avoid bleeding problems. Some conditions, like asthma or kidney disease, also might make acetaminophen the best choice for you. That is because NSAIDs can set off trouble associated with either of these conditions.²

As with any medication, you should not take more acetaminophen than your dentist recommends. This is very important because too much acetaminophen can cause permanent liver damage.¹ Sometimes acetaminophen is in other medications you may take, so it is important to check things like cold medicines to help keep you from taking too much.

NSAIDs. NSAIDs help keep swelling down in addition to reducing pain. There are a number of NSAIDs: ibuprofen (such as Advil [Pfizer] or Motrin [Johnson & Johnson]), naproxen sodium (such as Aleve [Bayer]), and aspirin. Used alone or with acetaminophen, these drugs are as good if not better at relieving pain than many prescription medications.³

PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS

Depending on your pain—the severity, or how long it lasts—your dentist may suggest a prescription medication. These medications can include some of the OTC drugs given at higher doses; for example, 200-milligram tablets of ibuprofen are sold OTC, but 400-mg tablets require a prescription.

Other prescription medicines may be a combination of an OTC and an opioid medication. Some examples are Vicodin (AbbVie), which is a mixture of acetaminophen and hydrocodone; Percocet (Endo), which is a mixture of acetaminophen and oxycodone; and Tylenol #3 (Johnson & Johnson), which is a mixture of acetaminophen and codeine.

Opioid medications can have side effects. Most commonly, opioids can cause nausea, vomiting, and constipation. Of greater concern, they can make you feel “high,” which can lead to addiction. Also, if too many are taken or they are taken with alcohol, opioids can be dangerous because you may breathe too slowly and not deeply enough,¹ which can be fatal. For these reasons and because OTC medications can be as good or better, opioids are not the first choice in pain relief.

Box: Storing and disposing of opioids

Opioids must be stored and disposed of carefully.^{4,5} For example:

- store opioids in a secure place, where others—children, family, friends, or visitors—cannot get hold of them;
- keep track of how many pills you should have in your bottle;
- dispose of leftover pills properly:
 - follow directions on the label or product information sheet about flushing the medication down the toilet (not all medications should be flushed);
 - mix the unused pills with something in your garbage, like used coffee grounds or kitty litter;
 - talk to your dentist or pharmacist about options, like take-back programs in your community.

Opioids can be helpful in some situations,¹ but they need to be taken and handled (Box) as directed.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Tell your dentist about your level of pain and how long you have had it. Give a complete medical history including all the medications you are taking. Also, tell your dentist if you or a family member has had a problem with drug or alcohol abuse. ■

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“For the Patient” provides general information on dental treatments. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.

You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.

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