

Know your Medicine: Paracetamol

written by Saarani Vengadesen | 14/06/2022

Feeling feverish? Muscle pain got you feeling down? How about a splitting headache? Chances are you've probably bought some pills to help curb the many aches you've faced, right? Well, the pills you bought could very well be paracetamol!

But wait, what is paracetamol? Paracetamol or [acetaminophen](#) is a medicine commonly used as a [painkiller](#) and helps reduce fever. Its history dates back more than a hundred years ago, in 1893 when it was first used clinically by a physician named von Mering. However, it wasn't commercially available in the United States until 1950, with Australia following suit in 1956. Throughout the 1960s and the 1980s, paracetamol continued to gain popularity rapidly. Due to its fast-acting nature and popularity, paracetamol became a staple in many households worldwide, with dozens of generic versions of paracetamol available today.



The question remains, however: how does paracetamol work? The science behind the drug's mode of action is unknown, even to many scientists. Theories suggest that paracetamol works on your nervous system. Befitting its title as a painkiller, it helps to reduce the intensity of pain signals to the brain. Concerning its [antifever](#) capabilities, it reduces body temperature by reducing the number of chemical compounds called [prostaglandins](#) in your body.

Prostaglandins are hormones that are responsible for the occurrence of fevers when you are sick.

Interestingly, paracetamol isn't the only medicine available to treat fevers and alleviate pain. Medicines, including [ibuprofen](#) and [aspirin](#), are often lumped together in the same category as paracetamol, as each can relieve fevers and pains. However, the key difference between these medicines and paracetamol is that paracetamol does not possess the ability to reduce inflammations or swellings. Compared to paracetamol, the main drawback of these medicines is their side effects, which are far more severe. Side effects of aspirin and ibuprofen can include stomach problems such as bleeding, ulcers, diarrhoea, kidney problems, high blood pressure, and rashes. It is also not recommended to take or consume them together regularly as it can worsen the side effects experienced.

In retrospect, paracetamol is relatively mild in terms of its side effects, which are rare. These can include bloody stools or urine, lower back pain, red spots on the skin, and rashes. Overdosing on paracetamol is a very real danger and can lead to vomiting, swellings,

diarrhoea, and stomach cramps. You are advised to seek medical help when you experience any of these symptoms. As for its interactions with other medicines or painkillers, it is safe to be taken together, provided that no additional medicines containing paracetamol are present. In general, paracetamol is usually safe to be taken and the preferred drug in treating fevers and mild pains when taken in the appropriate doses.

When it comes to taking paracetamol, there are several things to remember. An adult may take one to two 500 mg tablets every four to six hours, with a maximum of 4,000 mg every 24 hours. It is important to leave at least four hours between doses to prevent overdosing. Remember, the results are not instantaneous! The effects will take up to an hour to kick in, so hang tight before popping another tablet. It is also advisable to check if you're allergic to paracetamol.

Children up to three months may be prescribed paracetamol but at lower dosages. The dosages for children depend on their weight and are often given as a liquid. Paracetamol liquid has two strengths: 120 mg in 5 mL and 250 mg in 5 mL. Unsure of the dose to give to your kids? Check with your doctor or pharmacist on the correct dose for your kids. Like adults, wait at least four hours between doses and do not exceed four in 24 hours.

In Malaysia, a study of over 400 Malaysian consumers who used paracetamol daily revealed that 98% of the consumers consumed paracetamol. The consumers mainly used paracetamol for headaches and fevers. 94.3% of the consumers also preferred to consume 500mg tablets to 650mg tablets.

In short, paracetamol is a popular and safe over-the-counter medication as long as the correct dosage is administered. However, don't forget to check with your doctor for any inquiries before using it, especially regarding dosage and efficacy. Be smart, stay safe, and stay healthy!