

Paracetamol overdose

Accident and emergency

Patient information

What is paracetamol?

Paracetamol is a common painkiller found in many cold and flu medicines. It is also often combined with other pain relief drugs.

While safe at the right dose, taking too much paracetamol (an overdose) can cause serious harm and needs medical attention.

Why is an overdose dangerous?

Your body breaks down paracetamol safely at normal doses. But when you take too much, your body becomes overwhelmed.

This leads to a build-up of toxic by-products, which can damage your liver and kidneys.

Liver damage can cause:

- jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- itching
- easy bruising or bleeding
- swelling of the tummy
- in severe cases, it can lead to liver failure and even death
- you might need a liver transplant if the damage is very serious.

At first, you may feel:

- sick
- vomiting
- tummy (abdominal) pain.

However, many people feel fine in the early stages of an overdose.

That is why it is important to seek medical help immediately if you think you have taken too much, even if you feel okay.

What happens in hospital?

When you arrive, the healthcare team will:

- ask what and how much you took

- ask when you took it
- check if you took any other substances
- take your medical history
- take blood tests
- monitor your vital signs (like your heart rate, blood pressure).

Knowing the exact time you took the paracetamol is important. This helps us assess your risk and decide if you need treatment.

What is the treatment for paracetamol overdose

If your test results show a risk to your liver, you'll be given treatment. Paracetamol overdose is treated with a vitamin infusion known as Parvolex.

Parvolex (N-acetylcysteine)

- This is a vitamin-based infusion given through a drip for at least 21 hours
- It helps your body break down paracetamol safely
- It prevents liver damage if started early.

Parvolex does not cause an allergic reaction but can cause itching, rashes and wheeze. If you have had side effects from Parvolex before tell your nurse or doctor. We can:

- give other medicines to reduce side effects
- slow the drip rate.

Mental health support

If you took the overdose intentionally or need emotional support, we may refer you to the **Mental Health Liaison Team**

www.sussexpartnership.nhs.uk/our-services/urgent-care-services/mental-health-liaison-teams before you leave the hospital.

When to seek urgent help

Call 999 or go to the nearest Emergency Department if you experience:

- severe tummy pain, nausea, or vomiting
- yellow skin or eyes (jaundice)
- severe headache, confusion, or extreme sleepiness
- no urine (pee) for over 8 hours.

These symptoms could mean serious liver damage and need urgent care.

General support

For general medical advice please use the NHS website, the **NHS 111** service, walk-in-centres, or your GP.

- The **NHS website** www.nhs.uk provides online health information and guidance
- **NHS 111** phone line offers medical help and advice from trained advisers supported by nurses and paramedics. Available 24 hours a day. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones
- There are walk-in and urgent treatment services at Brighton Station, in Crawley and at Lewes Victoria Hospital
- **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** www.uhsussex.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support/pals can be contacted with your comments and concerns, and to provide general support.

This information is intended for patients receiving care in Brighton & Hove or Haywards Heath.

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