



Health

Eight Ways to Ditch Drugs

**FREQUENT HEADACHES**

INSTEAD OF **Painkillers**

TRY **Fewer pills, more sleep**

Who would've thought that taking medicine to stop pain could actually perpetuate the pounding? This can happen with certain headache "remedies." "A medication-overuse headache can occur when people who have frequent headaches take painkillers 15 or more days a month," says Peter Goadsby, M.D., director of the headache center at the University of California at San Francisco. Doctors don't fully understand why it happens, but it appears to occur most often when people take compound analgesics—that is, medicines with multiple active ingredients, such as Excedrin (which contains aspirin, acetaminophen, and caffeine) or Tylenol with codeine.

**PHARMA-FREE RX** Avoid the compound meds, and scale back using any pain pills as much as you can tolerate, Dr. Goadsby says. Strive for no more than two a week. Then focus on your sleep as a way of heading off headaches. The areas of your brain that contribute to your cranial pain are also involved in sleep, he says. By sticking to a strict—i.e., consistent—sleep schedule, you may be able to desensitize those trouble spots.

**MILD DEPRESSION**

INSTEAD OF **Antidepressants**

TRY **Retraining your brain**

To fight depression, consider battling the negativity head-on. That's the thinking behind a DIY treatment known as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). With this technique, you focus on controlling your reactions to certain thoughts and emotions—you learn to see them objectively rather than allowing them to sweep you away. In recent studies, MBCT proved to be as effective as antidepressants in preventing relapse, and more effective at enhancing quality of life. "When people stop taking antidepressants—and they often do because of side effects—they're vulnerable to relapse," says Willem Kuyken, Ph.D., of the mood disorders center at the University of Exeter. "MBCT gives people skills that help keep them well."

**PHARMA-FREE RX** One MBCT technique, the "3-minute breathing space," is designed to help end the swirl of negative thoughts in your head. You start by focusing on how your body feels as

well as on what you're thinking and feeling right now. Then you shift your attention to your breathing to bring yourself further into the present moment. Finally, you expand your awareness back out to your entire body while deliberately breathing in and out. If that sample feels effective for you, ask your doctor to recommend a therapist trained in MBCT.

**INSOMNIA**

INSTEAD OF **Sleep aids**

TRY **A few late nights**

Chronic toss-and-turner? Just give up. Go flip on Letterman. That's because cutting back your restless hours by delaying your bedtime could ultimately point you toward more solid slumber—and keep you off prescription sleep aids, says Lee Ritterband, Ph.D., an associate professor at the University of Virginia's department of psychiatry. That's good, because drugs like Ambien aren't permanent solutions. "Sleep medicines commonly lose their effectiveness over time because your body can grow used to them," says *Men's Health* advisor W. Christopher Winter, M.D., medical director of the Martha Jefferson Sleep Medicine Center in Charlottesville, Virginia.

**PHARMA-FREE RX** If you usually go to bed at 10 p.m. but don't nod off until 1 a.m., try to hit the sack at 1 a.m.—but wake up the same time you ordinarily would, Ritterband suggests. "You're creating some sleep deprivation, of course," he says, "but that makes it easier to fall and stay asleep on subsequent nights." After a few weeks of this, start pushing your bedtime up in 20-minute increments to see if you can maintain the gains.

**CONSTIPATION**

INSTEAD OF **Laxatives**

TRY **Turning on the waterworks**

Your colon moves. It twitches and tightens to keep things rolling down the line. But your colon can slow down or absorb too much liquid (for any number of reasons, including insufficient fiber in your diet, inactivity, dehydration, or certain meds), making waste linger and dry up. That's constipation. Americans spend about \$725 million a year on over-the-counter laxatives, according to the National Institute of Dia-

betes and Digestive Diseases. Frequent use of laxatives can cause a dose over time, leading to dependence. Instead, create small changes in your diet by downsizing your portion at breakfast. Liquids add fluid to the colon and bulk to stools, making them softer and easier to pass. While you're at it, eat a banana or an apple. "The bulk provided by their fiber stimulates the bowel to move in a rhythmic way—hence the phrase 'bowel movement,'" says Dr. Abramson. "Why would you use something to irritate your bowel—which is what many laxatives do—when you can simply eat fruit instead?"

**ASTHMA and ALLERGIES**

INSTEAD OF **Daily medicines**

TRY **An air filter**

Instead of trying to change the way your body responds to irritants—that's how most asthma and allergy meds work—go after the irritants directly. Whole-house air filters and even portable units can significantly reduce the triggers that cause your wheezing, chest tightness, and coughing, says Ted Myatt, Sc.D., a senior scientist at the consulting firm Environmental Health and Engineering, near Boston. His 2008 study in *Environmental Health* found that high-efficiency in-duct air filters reduced cat allergens by up to 55 percent and fungal spores by up to 75 percent. Your doctor can tell you whether home filtering can minimize your need for an OTC or prescription drug.

**PHARMA-FREE RX** A whole-house air filtration system has a big price tag—\$900 to \$1,200 for installation into existing ductwork. Or you can place a portable HEPA air filter in your bedroom, where you spend most of your time at home. Myatt's study found that a portable unit like the \$115 Hunter QuietFlo HEPA 30090 still does the job in a single-room scenario.

**FLU**

INSTEAD OF **Antiviral meds**

TRY **Jacking up the humidity**

Wage your flu battle at the hardware store, not the pharmacy. Your weapon of choice: a humidifier. "The airborne influenza virus survives longer in drier air," Myatt says. His newest study in *Environmental Health* found that a humidifier in a bedroom produced significant reductions in flu-virus survival. Given the disputed effectiveness of the popular antiviral drug Tamiflu—a 2009 study was underwhelmed by it—this ounce of prevention has obvious appeal.

**PHARMA-FREE RX** If the flu is going around, place a portable humidifier in your bedroom and set it for 50 percent humidity, Myatt says. Better-quality models come with microbe-fighting UV lights or silver in their filters. We like the Air-O-Swiss 7135 humidifier, at \$170. Bonus: It'll keep your skin from becoming itchy and scratchy as well. ■

**Trick yourself into better health**

A placebo can work, even when you know you're taking one

If you're leery about taking pills, ask your doctor for a dummy drug. Harvard researchers tried this ancient con on irritable bowel syndrome sufferers, giving them either a sugar pill or no treatment for 3 weeks. The twist: It wasn't really a con—the placebo takers were told what the docs were up to. Still, they reported a 59 percent improvement in symptoms, versus just 35 percent improvement for the no-treatment group. Study author Ted Kaptchuk says people with conditions defined by "self-report," such as chronic pain, headache, depression, and insomnia, may be more likely to feel better using a placebo, thanks to either faith in their doctors' hunches or optimism because they were doing something. Your doctor may be willing to start with a vitamin or even something as simple as chewing gum to usher in an improvement, possibly eliminating the need for a scrip.

JULIE STEWART