









A guide to common OTC pain relief treatments

With so many different options to choose from, this chart can help you recommend the most effective OTC pain relief medications for your patients based on their type of pain.¹ The advice summarized in this chart is based on scientific evidence in current, published clinical treatment guidelines and peer-reviewed literature.

OTC Pain Relief Comparison Chart




Key: The highlighted area indicates it is recommended as first-line treatment.

Pain type	OTC analgesics		
	Topical diclofenac	Oral Ibuprofen	Acetaminophen
Mild to Moderate Pain 	⊗	✔	✔
Musculoskeletal (MSK) pain 	⊗	✔	✔
Osteoarthritis 	✔ #1 for knee OA pain	✔	✔
Headache 	⊗	✔	✔
Dental pain 	⊗	✔	✔
Migraine 	⊗	✔	⊗
Dysmenorrhoea (period pain) 	⊗	✔	✔
Acute back pain 	⊗	✔	✔









Use OTC cautiously in case of:

-  Other concurrent medications, including natural remedies
-  Allergies
-  Pre-existing medical conditions
-  Smoking/alcohol consumption
-  Patient >65

Things to remember:

-  Begin with an effective pain relief product at the lowest dose for the shortest duration needed.
-  Alert patients to maximum daily doses and the potential for overmedicating with multiple products.
-  If pain doesn't improve, advise the patient to return for a follow-up visit.

OTC options recommended in treatment guidelines for the management of pain^{2,4}

Type of Pain	First-line recommendation	Corresponding Association(s)
 Migraine	NSAIDs (including aspirin), non-opioid analgesics, acetaminophen, or caffeinated analgesic combinations* (eg, aspirin+acetaminophen+caffeine) for mild-to-moderate migraines. ^{1,2}	American Headache Society & American Academy of Family Physicians
 Osteoarthritis	Topical NSAIDs for the treatment of knee OA and Oral NSAIDs. ^{4,5}	American College of Rheumatology & Osteoarthritis Research Society International
 Acute back pain	NSAIDs for the treatment of acute, non-specific low back pain. ⁷	American College of Physicians
 Dental pain	NSAIDs for mild to moderate pain and a fixed-dose combination of ibuprofen & acetaminophen for moderate to severe pain as they are shown to be more effective at reducing pain than opioid analgesics. ⁶	American Dental Association
 Menstrual pain	NSAIDs for primary dysmenorrhea. ⁸	American Academy of Family Physicians
 Headache	NSAIDs and acetaminophen. ^{1,2}	National Headache Foundation
 Musculoskeletal pain (MSK)	Topical NSAIDs, with or without menthol gel, should be used as first line therapy for adults with acute pain from non-low back, musculoskeletal injuries. Oral NSAIDs and acetaminophen may be considered. ³	American Academy of Family Physicians & American College of Physicians
 General acute nonspecific pain	NSAIDs for proven efficacy and cost, acetaminophen is an alternate option.	American Academy of Family Physicians

*Only FDA approved OTC products for migraine

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