

# Paracetamol Overdose: Patient Information

## Emergency Department

Paracetamol overdose can cause serious effects in most adults. If not treated immediately:

- Large overdoses can lead to serious liver damage, although you may not be notice symptoms until 4 to 6 days after taking the overdose.
- Smaller overdoses can cause liver damage in people who have had liver disease or alcohol problems.
- Large untreated overdoses can kill within a few days or to up to 3 weeks later.

Liver damage may be temporary or permanent, depending on how much you have taken. Even if you have no symptoms, if not treated immediately, serious liver damage may progress to:

- Brain damage
- Bleeding
- Altered heart rhythm
- Low blood sugar levels (hypoglycemia)
- Kidney failure (usually within 3 days)
- Inflamed pancreas (pancreatitis)

You need to report your overdose as soon as possible for proper treatment.

Ideally ask for help within 8 hours of having taken the overdose – even if you do not have any symptoms.

## What are the symptoms of a paracetamol overdose?

The symptoms can vary greatly, depending on the amount of paracetamol that has been taken.

In the first 24 hours you may not have any symptoms, however, some people report early symptoms such as:

- Paleness
- Loss of appetite
- Irritability
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sweating

After the first 24 hours, you may have:

- Pain in your side or upper right area of your tummy, jaundice (yellow skin or eyes), or other signs of liver damage.
- Difficulty peeing, a warning of kidney damage.

## What is the treatment of a paracetamol overdose?

There is an antidote for paracetamol overdose if the levels in the blood show the need. This antidote can help prevent liver damage. However, if the paracetamol was taken more than 24 hours previously, the antidote will not work as well.

If a large amount is taken, you may require treatment:

1. You will need a blood test to measure the amount of paracetamol in your blood.
2. The antidote, *N-acetylcysteine*, is given as an infusion into your vein.
3. Your treatment will also include
  - Treating the symptoms as they occur, and
  - Help from the mental health service.
4. During and after your treatment, while you recover, you will need repeated blood tests to measure the amount of paracetamol in your blood. For severe overdoses you will also need blood tests to monitor for liver failure.
5. If your liver fails you may need a liver transplant.

My notes: