Nonprescription pain relievers, also referred to as over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers, are those you can buy without a prescription. The Food and Drug Administration has determined that these medications are safe for consumers to use without the direction of a health care provider. These pain relievers contain strong ingredients that are generally effective for the most common headaches, toothaches, muscle aches, joint pain and menstrual cramps.

The array of tablets, caplets and gel caps in extra-strength, maximum-strength, migraine and arthritis formulas can be confusing — but all pain relievers available over the counter fall into four categories: aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen and naproxen. (Ibuprofen and naproxen, along with certain prescription drugs, are in a drug class called nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs.)

Aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen and naproxen are generic names for the chemicals that relieve pain, and brand-name pain relievers contain one or more of these chemicals. Choosing one over another is a matter of convenience and minimizing side effects.

**Aspirin (Bayer, Bufferin, Ecotrin)**
- What it does: Aspirin relieves pain and reduces inflammation.
- Side effects: Aspirin can irritate the stomach. Taking it with food or taking a pill with a buffered coating can reduce irritation, but coated pills may take longer to be effective.
- Do not take aspirin if you have ulcers, asthma, uncontrolled high blood pressure, liver or kidney disease, or a bleeding disorder.
- Do not take aspirin with warfarin or other anticoagulants, prescription arthritis medication or medication for diabetes.

**Acetaminophen (Tylenol, Datril)**
- What it does: Acetaminophen relieves pain but does not reduce inflammation. Therefore, it is not the first choice for joint pain, muscle strains or sprains resulting from inflammation.
- Side effects: Acetaminophen is gentle on the stomach.
- Do not take acetaminophen if you are a heavy drinker, to avoid increased risk of liver damage.

**Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin)**
- What it does: Ibuprofen relieves pain and reduces inflammation.
- Side effects: Some people might experience stomach upset with ibuprofen, but it is generally gentler than aspirin.
- Do not take ibuprofen if you are allergic to aspirin or have ulcers, asthma, liver or kidney disease, or a bleeding disorder.

**Naproxen Sodium (Aleve)**
- How it works: Naproxen relieves pain and reduces inflammation. The recommended dose lasts for 12 hours, about twice as long as other pain relievers.
- Side effects: Some people might experience stomach upset with naproxen, but it is generally gentler than aspirin.
- Avoid naproxen if you are allergic to aspirin or have ulcers, asthma, liver or kidney disease, or a bleeding disorder. Heavy drinkers should avoid naproxen due to increased risk of liver damage.

**Combination Products**
Some over-the-counter medications use caffeine to boost the effectiveness of aspirin (Anacin), acetaminophen (Excedrin Aspirin Free) or both (Excedrin Extra Strength). Although caffeine does not relieve pain by itself, it can reduce the amount of acetaminophen or aspirin you'd need to take to get the same level of relief. The caffeine in these products can cause sleeplessness, restlessness and nausea, especially if you also drink a lot of coffee or tea.

Other OTC pain relievers marketed as “PM” or “nighttime” add antihistamines, such as diphenhydramine, to help you relax.

**Usual Dosage**
Unless your nurse practitioner gives you different directions, take the amount indicated on the label. Taking too little medication may not effectively treat your pain, and taking too much may cause side effects without providing additional pain relief. Also, overusing medications to relieve headache — taking pain relievers daily or almost every day — can actually cause worse “rebound” headaches.

**Children’s Pain Relievers**
Avoid giving aspirin to children with a viral disease such as flu or chicken pox, since it has been associated with Reye syndrome, a rare brain and liver disease. Acetaminophen and ibuprofen have not been associated with the disease and are safe for children at the doses recommended on the package. Naproxen has not been proven safe for children younger than 12 years old.