

Analgesia

Analgesics are among the oldest drugs described, albeit not necessarily for medicinal use. For example, the Sumerians isolated opioids (probably for their euphoric effects) in the third millennium b. c. and the use of willow bark (salicin) for fever was first reported in the eighteenth century. Both types of drugs are still in use, but today they are supplemented by a wide array of substances ranging from antidepressants to ion channel blockers. Not all of these are prescribed by physicians.

Many compounds are sold over the counter and thus available to the public for self-medication. As a result, analgesics are also the most misused class of drugs and are the culprit for a multitude of health problems due to untoward side effects.

This volume attempts to summarize the current state of knowledge on mechanisms underlying the various effects of these drugs, their side effect profiles, and their indications and contraindications in clinical use. It also gives insights into current efforts to discover novel mechanisms underlying different types of pain generation and the resulting development of new modulating compounds. These efforts have emerged mostly as a consequence of the more profound insights provided by molecular methods and of the now common use of animal models of pathological, rather than physiological, pain. These important issues are elaborated in the introductory chapter. In parallel, contemporary interdisciplinary treatment approaches have taught us that somatic mechanisms alone cannot explain pain; it is an experience shaped as well by social context, memory, and other psychological phenomena. Thus, the book closes with two chapters putting pharmacological strategies into a broader perspective. All of these advancements culminate in the contemporary common goal of developing mechanism-based rather than empiric approaches to the treatment of pain.

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 Springer

320,99 €

299,99 € (zzgl. MwSt.)

Lieferfrist: bis zu 10 Tage

Artikelnummer: 9783540338222

Medium: Buch

ISBN: 978-3-540-33822-2

Verlag: Springer

Erscheinungstermin: 18.10.2006

Sprache(n): Englisch

Auflage: 1. Auflage 2006

Serie: Handbook of Experimental Pharmacology

Produktform: Gebunden

Gewicht: 834 g

Seiten: 435

Format (B x H): 160 x 241 mm

