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Pharmacy and supermarket drugs

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OVERVIEW

Many medicines can be bought without a prescription from pharmacies and supermarkets. Some of these medicines can be misused and may lead to dependence. Examples include painkillers, antihistamines, and cough, cold and flu medicines. High doses can also cause serious damage to different parts of the body (e.g. heart, liver or kidneys).

Prescription medicines (including benzos or opioids) are also misused or sold on the street. These medicines -often have a smaller difference between a safe and a dangerous dose than over-the-counter medicines (i.e. a lower safety margin). That is why they should only be used if prescribed by a doctor. If people without a prescription use them, they can cause serious damage.

There are also a number of common household and supermarket items that can be misused (e.g. methylated spirits, vanilla essence). Use of these products can also lead to dependence and damage to the body.

This chapter describes: reasons for misuse of these medicines and products, the harms from misuse, and treatments to help people cut down or stop.

OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICINES

Painkillers

A number of painkillers are available ‘over-the-counter’. Many of these painkillers contain low doses of codeine (an opioid that is a distant cousin of heroin). The codeine is combined with paracetamol or ibuprofen. Some common examples are Panadeine Plus (with paracetamol), and Nurofen Plus and ProVen (with ibuprofen).

‘Dextropropoxyphene’ is another opioid available in some over-the-counter combination tablets in Australia. Capadex (with paracetamol) and Di-gesic (with paracetamol) are some common brand names. Dextropropoxyphene is currently being phased out in Australia because of safety concerns.

Why do people misuse painkillers?

Some people take these medicines for pain, but painkillers with codeine may not be any better for pain relief than simple paracetamol or ibuprofen. But these medicines can make people feel less anxious or agitated, or make them feel a strong sense of happiness (euphoria).

What are the harms?

People who regularly take high doses of painkillers may become dependent on the codeine. Once dependent, a large number of tablets are needed to get the same opioid effect, and to stop withdrawals. Large doses of paracetamol or ibuprofen can damage the body. For example, too much paracetamol can cause liver failure, and too much ibuprofen can cause bleeding in the gut, kidney failure and fluid build-up (fluid retention). If a person uses a very large amount, the codeine can lead to coma and stopped breathing.

Dextropropoxyphene can cause irregular heart rhythms. It can also cause slowed breathing, and sometimes stopped breathing.

Taking opioid painkillers with other depressants such as alcohol or sleeping tablets can make the person more likely to overdose. It can also make the person drowsy when driving.

What treatments are available?

Many people only need a brief intervention to warn them of the risks of codeine misuse. Some people who are dependent on the codeine (or other opioid) can be switched to a safer opioid pain medicine such as a buprenorphine (Norspan) patch. If the person is highly dependent on codeine, then they sometimes need a buprenorphine or methadone maintenance program.

You may also be able to help your client get assessed and receive treatment for their pain problem that started the cycle of painkiller misuse (e.g. from a pain clinic, GP or hospital; see Opioids, p. 139).

Preventing problems and reducing the harms

Wherever possible clients should use 'simple' painkillers that do not contain codeine (e.g. use paracetamol or ibuprofen on their own). Because paracetamol and ibuprofen work in different ways to tackle pain, a person can alternate them (e.g. take ibuprofen with meals and paracetamol if needed between meals). It is very important that only the recommended daily dose is taken, whether or not the medicine contains codeine.

Supporting your client to get treatment for problems like tooth decay as soon as possible may reduce their need for painkillers. Some people may be able to organise free or cheaper dental treatment through their GP, Aboriginal Medical Service or hospital.

Antihistamines

Antihistamines are over-the-counter medicines used for travel sickness and hay fever. They may also be found in some combination painkillers, and cough and cold remedies.

Why do people misuse antihistamines?

Some antihistamines can make you feel really tired (sedated), and people may misuse them to get to sleep, to calm down or get 'stoned'. Some antihistamines can make you see and hear things that are not there (hallucinations), and people sometimes misuse them for this effect.

What are the harms?

Some people may become dependent on antihistamines, but we do not know how common this is. Withdrawal symptoms are very uncommon.

Even if taken in the way they are supposed to be taken, antihistamines can cause a dry mouth. When higher doses are taken (more than is prescribed by a doctor or advised by the pharmacist), the heart rate can become fast and irregular. Confusion and disorientation (delirium), coma and seizures can also happen, but usually only after very high doses.

What treatments are available?

There are no specific treatments for antihistamine misuse. Brief intervention and counselling approaches can be used.

Preventing problems and reducing the harms

Supporting your client to get help for any underlying sleep or anxiety problems may be helpful. Avoid mixing antihistamines with alcohol or other drugs as using these together increases the risk of overdose and other problems.

Cough, cold and flu medicines

Cough, cold and flu medicines often contain combinations of:

- Paracetamol
- Drugs that reduce inflammation (such as ibuprofen)
- Opioids (codeine and dextromethorphan – 'DXM')
- Antihistamines
- Drugs that dry out the nose (decongestants, e.g. pseudoephedrine).

These medicines are taken when someone has a cough, cold or flu. They do not make the underlying illness any better – they just reduce the symptoms.

Why do people misuse cough, cold and flu medicines?

People misuse medicines that contain pseudoephedrine because they cause a stimulant effect that is like amphetamines if used in high doses (see Stimulants, p. 159). Because pseudoephedrine is also used to make amphetamines, the Australian Government has put restrictions on the sale of this product (people have to provide their name and address at the pharmacy when they buy medicines that contain pseudoephedrine).

Other people use cough medicines because they like the opioid effect (it makes them feel calmer or 'high'). DXM can cause hallucinations in higher doses (makes a person see and hear things that are not there). Some cough medicines also contain alcohol.

Sometimes people combine these medicines with alcohol or other drugs to get more of a 'high'.

What are the harms?

If people overuse nasal decongestants, when they stop their runny nose comes back as bad or worse than before ('rebound' in the symptoms). Because of this, nasal decongestants should only be taken short-term. These drugs should not be taken by people with severe heart disease or high blood pressure (hypertension), as they can make these illnesses worse.

People taking certain types of anti-depressants should also avoid cold and flu medicines containing pseudoephedrine. Examples include monoamine oxidase inhibitors (e.g. tranylcypamine) or tricyclic anti-depressants (e.g. amitriptyline).

It can be dangerous to take pseudoephedrine with amphetamines or cocaine because these drugs have similar effects on the body that increases the chances of problems. It can lead to high blood pressure and heart attack.

Some cough, cold and flu remedies contain large amounts of sugars like sorbitol. This can cause diarrhoea if high doses are used.

What treatments are available?

There are no specific treatments for misuse of cough, cold and flu medicines. Usual brief intervention and counselling approaches can be used.

Preventing problems and reducing the harms

Inform clients that using these medicines does not make them get better more quickly, and that they should only use them for a short time and only take the recommended dose. If your client uses these medicines, advise them not to mix them with alcohol or other sedatives (e.g. benzos). The client should also avoid driving because these medicines can make people drowsy.

PRESCRIBED MEDICINES THAT ARE MISUSED OR SOLD ON THE STREETS

Prescription opioids

Prescription opioids include strong painkillers such as oxycodone (e.g. Endone, OxyContin), morphine (e.g. Kapanol, MS Contin), and higher doses of codeine (e.g. in Panadeine Forte), as well as methadone and buprenorphine, which are prescribed for opioid dependence.

Why do people misuse prescription opioids?

Prescription opioids may be misused because they make people feel less agitated or anxious, and they may feel a strong sense of happiness (euphoria) when they take them, or because they help people get to sleep.

People may misuse prescription opioids because heroin is not available, or because they have become dependent after taking them for pain relief, particularly with chronic pain. Some people use prescription opioids if they cannot get on methadone or buprenorphine maintenance treatment.

What are the harms?

If prescription opioids are used in a way other than prescribed, overdose can cause coma, reduced breathing and death. All opioids can cause dependence.

What treatments are available?

Treatment focuses on getting the client's opioid use under control. This can be done by arranging for clients to pick their medicines up more regularly from the pharmacy (e.g. every day). Another way is to arrange for family or a responsible person in the community to look after the medicines and hand them to the client one day at a time. Some clients may need to go on methadone or buprenorphine maintenance treatment, in the same way as people who are heroin dependent (see Opioids, p. 150).

Preventing problems and reducing the harms

People with chronic pain may get relief from physiotherapy with exercise plans. Counselling can also help people manage their pain. Sometimes people have to come to terms with the fact that they cannot totally get rid of the pain, which can be hard. As with heroin, if someone is injecting prescription opioids, they should use clean fits, use a filter, not use alone and call an ambulance if someone drops. But injecting crushed tablets is particularly risky, because tiny particles can get lodged in different parts of the body, including the lungs (see Harms of injecting, p. 289).

Benzos

Why do people misuse benzos?

Benzos are medicines such as Valium (diazepam), Serepax (oxazepam) and Normison (temazepam). They are sometimes prescribed for sleep problems or anxiety. People may abuse benzos because it makes them feel calmer, more relaxed, or helps them get to sleep.

What are the harms?

In the long-term, benzos often increase anxiety and disrupt the body's normal sleep-wake cycle. Misuse can also lead people to lose control of what they say and do, and say and do things they would not normally do ('disinhibition'). There is also an increased risk of overdose if benzos are combined with alcohol or other sedating drugs such as opioids.

What treatments are available?

Treatment of benzo dependence is to wean the dose down to zero over a period of time, and use other treatments to manage sleep and anxiety (see Benzos, p. 180). This may include psychological treatments like relaxation and medicines such as anti-depressants.

Medicines intended for treating mental illness

Why do people misuse medicines intended for treating mental illness?

Medicines for treating depression (anti-depressants) or psychosis (anti-psychotics) change the chemistry in the brain. There are many different types of these medicines including Zyprexa (olanzapine) and Seroquel (quetiapine). People may misuse them because they can make the person feel very relaxed (sedated). We do not know how often these medicines are misused.

What are the harms?

Anti-depressants and anti-psychotics can cause heart problems if taken in large doses. In large enough doses they can even cause the heart to stop. Long-term misuse over months to years can cause weight gain and diabetes. People should not take medicines that have been prescribed for someone else.

Viagra

Viagra (sildenafil) is marketed for treatment of erection problems in men. It acts by relaxing the blood vessels.

Why do people misuse Viagra?

Viagra is used to help men get an erection. Some people use Viagra with alcohol or other drugs (e.g. ecstasy, amphetamines). This is because those drugs may increase sexual desire but can make it difficult to get an erection.

What are the harms?

Viagra can be dangerous if taken by someone who has heart problems, if taken in high doses, or if taken with other medicines or recreational drugs. In these cases it can cause blood pressure to drop to dangerous levels. This reduces the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to different parts of the body, which can damage the body's organs such as liver and kidneys.

ALCOHOL-BASED PRODUCTS IN SUPERMARKETS

A number of products contain quite high concentrations of alcohol (e.g. mouth wash, vanilla essence, methylated spirits). Some mouthwashes, for example, contain 20% alcohol, which is more alcohol than in most wines. Methylated spirits is almost 100% alcohol.

Why do people misuse alcohol-based products?

People misuse alcohol-based products from supermarkets and other shops because it can be cheaper than buying alcohol. Young people sometimes choose this form of alcohol because they are not allowed to buy alcohol from bottle shops.

What are the harms?

People can become dependent on the alcohol in products like mouthwash, vanilla essence and methylated spirits. Some of the non-alcoholic parts of these products can also cause health problems (e.g. too much of sugars like sorbitol can cause diarrhoea). Methylated spirits is very 'rough' on the stomach and many people develop pain in the belly and vomiting.

For information on preventing problems, treatment and reducing the harms from alcohol-based products bought in supermarkets.

ENERGY AND COLA DRINKS

Energy and cola drinks contain large amounts of caffeine and sugar. Some energy drinks contain guarana, which itself has high levels of caffeine. Popular energy drinks include V, Red Bull and Mother.

Why do people misuse energy and cola drinks?

People may drink energy and cola drinks because they are thirsty, or because they want to stay awake. Some people mix highly caffeinated drinks with alcohol so they can feel more alert and keep drinking more alcohol and not get too sleepy. Young people are using these drinks with alcohol because they taste like soft drinks and hide the taste of the alcohol.

What are the harms?

Too much caffeine can cause agitation, sleep problems, tremor, nausea/vomiting and heart pounding or racing (palpitations). Even larger doses can cause confusion, seizures, very fast heart rate, and altered heart rhythm. When caffeine is stopped suddenly, a person can get a headache (rebound headache) and poor concentration. The person may feel less drunk if they mix these drinks with alcohol and so may drink more. This can increase risky behaviours like having car accidents, getting into fights and having unprotected sex.

These drinks contain lots of sugar, which can contribute to obesity and problems with teeth. Diet drinks may be very acidic, and this can still cause teeth damage even though they have no sugar.

Because caffeine and other stimulant drugs (e.g. amphetamines) have similar effects on the body, taking them together can increase the chance of problems, such as rapid heart rate and poor sleep.

What treatments are available?

There are no specific treatments for people who misuse energy and cola drinks. Brief interventions and counselling could be used.

Preventing problems and reducing the harms

If people cannot stop drinking energy and cola drinks, they should try not to drink them after midday so that they have less sleep problems. They can try to have fewer drinks in one session; replacing every second drink with water can help to reduce the amount consumed.

INHALANTS

Inhalants are products like petrol, paint, glue and cleaning products that give off vapours (fumes that may be invisible) at room temperature (see Petrol, paint and other inhalants, p. 207).

Many of these products are available in supermarkets. Inhalant misuse occurs when the vapours from these products are deliberately breathed in to get 'high'. Heavy intoxication with inhalants can be very damaging to the body and may require an emergency response (e.g. calling an ambulance, resuscitation). Counselling is the best available treatment to help people reduce or stop using inhalants. There are no medicines currently available for the treatment of inhalant dependence, although some medicines are used to treat individual symptoms.

FURTHER READING

The National Prescribing Service has free information for clients and health professionals on pharmacy and supermarket drugs. See: www.nps.org.au.