

Adolescents and media coverage of over-the-counter and complementary medicines

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Introduction As many as 42 per cent of adults¹ and 54 per cent of adolescents² in the United States use complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). There is increasing coverage of CAM in the media, including on the internet. CAM products are widely available for purchase in pharmacies and supermarkets and over the internet, without prescription, and are commonly advertised as "herbal" and "natural". There is a lack of data regarding safety and efficacy of these products among the paediatric population.³

The aim of this study was to explore and compare adolescents' knowledge and perceptions of CAM and over-the-counter medicines.

Method A series of 13 single-sex focus groups was conducted with 45 adolescents aged 14–19 in Monroe County, New York State. A convenience sample of adolescents was recruited to reflect a diversity of ethnicities, residence (urban/suburban), CAM use, and presence of a chronic illness (eating disorder, asthma, diabetes). Each focus group explored adolescents' knowledge and opinions about CAM, over-the-counter medicines (OTCs), sources of information about CAM and OTCs, and reactions to media coverage of both. In addition, adolescents were asked what health concerns or issues they believed were most salient to their age group.

Each group was audiotaped and summary notes of the main themes were produced.

Results When asked directly, adolescents denied being familiar with CAM. However, further probing revealed adolescents' knowledge of a wide range of CAM therapies, especially herbal products.

Most adolescents know about herbal products which relate to their stated health concerns; adolescents are most concerned with wellness, especially weight control, appearance, and mental health. Regardless of age, ethnicity, residence, or presence of chronic illness, adolescents reported

FOCAL POINTS

- * Focus groups were conducted with adolescents to explore their knowledge and opinions of complementary and alternative medicine and over-the-counter medicines
- * Adolescents are more focused on staying well rather than on treating illness; thus, they are aware of herbal products they see as relevant to staying healthy
- * Pharmacists need to be aware of the messages teens receive through the media that appeal to their sense of well-being and concerns about their appearance
- * Pharmacists should also be prepared to respond to adolescents' questions about herbal products

being most familiar with herbal products marketed for either weight loss or weight gain. Teens usually referred to these products by indication or herb name, rather than by brand name.

In contrast, for OTCs, adolescents reported being most familiar with pain relievers or cold/influenza remedies, and most commonly referred to these products by their brand names.

Adolescents reported a wide range of information sources for both herbal products and OTCs; sources common to both included pharmacists, doctors and the internet.

Most adolescents believed that advertising could be false or misleading. They were critical of depictions of immediate relief from OTC pain reliever and cold/influenza remedies in advertising, based on their experiences. However, they believed herbal product advertising might influence adolescents because of the claims made (lose weight, look better, be happier).

In addition, adolescents stated that, in general, they would be likely to think most "herbal" products were safer than OTCs, but that they may not be efficacious or may have unknown negative effects.

Discussion During adolescence, health is linked to beauty, body image, and self-esteem.⁴ Many herbal products are marketed to "safely" and "naturally" change one's appearance.

These messages are pervasive and

these products appeal to adolescents based on these indications. Adolescents are more focused on staying well rather than on treating illness; thus, they are aware of herbal products they see as relevant to staying healthy.

Pharmacists need to be aware of the messages teens receive through the media that appeal to their sense of well-being and concerns about their appearance. Pharmacists should also be prepared to respond to adolescents' questions about herbal products.

References

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Int J Pharm Pract
2002;10(suppl):R61