

The risks of pharmaceutical use: Why should I care?

Please note that the information provided in this fact sheet does not constitute as medical advice, and should not be taken as such. Please consult your local health professional or GP before making changes to your use of prescribed medication.

While the medically supervised use of pharmaceutical drugs may be the most appropriate approach for specific health needs, many Australians may not be aware of the harms of using pharmaceutical drugs if medical guidance is not closely followed.

The non-prescribed use of pharmaceutical drugs can result in both short and long-term effects that are harmful to health, these effects include:

- Impairment in mental faculties (thinking, memory loss)
- Anxiety and depression
- Mood instability (paranoia, aggression, irritability)
- Fatigue
- Skin rashes and weight gain
- Dependency
- Overdose
- Drug-induced death (more likely when taken with another drug such as alcohol)^{1,2}

Pharmaceutical drugs are more likely to be involved in a drug-induced death, than illicit drugs.³

Who is at risk?

The people who are at the greatest risk of non-prescribed use and overdose are:

- **People with complex health issues and mental health problems** – who often combine different medications, thus increasing the potential for overdose. If alcohol is consumed, the risk is further increased.
- **Men in their 30s** – partially due to self-medication to cope with problems such as depression, anxiety and rage.⁴
- **Women in their 40s** – primarily due to sleeping problems. Women are twice as likely to be prescribed benzodiazepines than men.⁵
- **People who metabolise codeine to morphine ultra-rapidly** – constitutes around 5% of Australians,⁶ who can overdose after taking

even a small amount of codeine, and may not be aware of the problem until after the drug is taken.

- **People in rural and regional areas** – rural and regional areas have been shown to have a higher consumption of over-the-counter and prescription medication, as well as higher rates of treatment for dependence on pharmaceutical opioids in areas.⁷
- **People suffering from chronic pain, stress, anxiety and insomnia**

Many believe that pharmaceuticals are safe because they are legal drugs, or that medical guidance can be followed loosely. However, some medications cause more harm than others, specifically opioid painkillers and benzodiazepines.

These medications should generally only be used in the short term, otherwise the risk of harms can increase such as the potential for non-prescribed use, negative side effects, and dependency.

To learn more about opioids and benzodiazepines, check out Alcohol and Drug Foundation’s Drug Facts pages, for information on the drugs and their effects.

Some of the reasons why the non-prescribed use of pharmaceuticals is a problem in Australia is due to:

- High rates of anxiety, stress and insomnia
- Lack of access or understanding of alternative treatments
- Doctors prescribing pharmaceutical drugs, when alternative or complementary therapies would be more beneficial
- Patient expectation of a quick fix
- Over promotion of certain drugs by pharmaceutical companies for the purpose of sales at the risk of public health

It is important to be informed on how to safely use a prescribed or over-the-counter medication, and avoid engaging in potentially harmful behaviours, including:

- Taking more medication than prescribed or directed on the packet, either in one dose or over time.
- Taking medication in a different way to what's recommended.
- Using medication without a prescription and ongoing medical supervision.
- Combining drugs, including alcohol, when it's not recommended
- Continuing with activities that medication affects, such as driving, working, looking after children.
- Sharing prescription medication with friends, family or colleagues.

Combining drugs:

When drugs are taken together it increases the risk of harm. If a person takes a range of depressant drugs together, such as opioid painkillers and alcohol, it increases their risk of overdose.

Alcohol is particularly important to keep in mind, as some people may not recognise alcohol as a drug or may not understand how it interacts with other drugs including pharmaceuticals.

Getting help

If you are unsure or would like to know more about a medication you are taking, talk to your doctor or pharmacist. Your doctor can inform you on the side effects or potential harms associated with both prescription and over-the-counter medication.

They can also assist you with pain management strategies and inform you of the complementary or alternative therapies you can access.

References

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3. ABS. Drug induced deaths in Australia: A changing story www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3303.0~2016~Main%20Features~Drug%20Induced%20Deaths%20in%20Australia~6
4. Beyondblue. Man Therapy: Guide to Mind Health. Man Therapy. [Online] <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/men>.
5. Reconnexion. Benzodiazepines (tranquillisers and sleeping pills). Reconnexion. [Online] <http://www.reconnexion.org.au/benzodiazepines-tranquillisers-and-sleeping-pills/w1/i1023211>
6. Trends and characteristics of accidental and intentional codeine overdose deaths in Australia. Med J Aust, 2015. 203(7): p.299. Roxburgh, A., Hall, W.D., Burns, L., Pilgrim, J., Saar, E., Nielson, S. and Degenhardt, L. 7, 2015, Medical Journal of Australia, Vol. 203, p.299.
7. Changes in non-opioid substitution treatment episodes for pharmaceutical opioids and heroin from 2002 to 2011. Nielsen, S., Roxburgh, A., Bruno, R., Lintzeris, N., Jefferson, A., and Degenhardt, L.. 2015, Drug and Alcohol Dependence, Vol. 149, pp. 212-219.

Other help, support services and resources

Links to further help and support • adf.org.au/help-support/

Information on what to ask your GP • adf.org.au/insights/script-for-your-doctor/

For information on treatment

There are a range of treatment services available to support the recovery from an alcohol or drug dependency. To find out more information about treatment services in your area, contact the alcohol and drug intake and assessment service. **ACSO • 1300 022 760**
(9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

DirectLine is also available to provide free and confidential information, counselling and referral for alcohol and drug issues 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

DirectLine • 1800 888 236 • www.directline.org.au

● Further information

DrugInfo • 1300 858 584

Free confidential information and advice about alcohol and other drugs (9am–5pm, Monday–Friday).

Medicines Line • 1300 633 424

Information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines (9am–5pm Monday–Friday).

Family Drug Help • 1300 660 068 • www.familydrughelp.com.au (Victorian-based)

Services are available to support those around you who may be affected by your drug use. As well as providing understanding, they can provide information about how best to help during treatment.

Family Drug Support • 1300 368 186 • www.fds.org.au

Support for families faced with problematic drug use.



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