

The risks of pharmaceutical use: What can be done?

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.

Australians are using increasingly higher levels of pharmaceuticals to manage pain, anxiety and depression. This can lead to multiple harms. We need to take action collectively to promote the safest use of pharmaceutical drugs in Australia and avoid preventable harms such as dependence, overdose, or the potential for drug-induced death.

It's important that communities in Australia are aware of the risks and benefits of using pharmaceutical medications, including potential side effects, so people can make good decisions based on the correct information.

Part of empowering people to take responsibility for their health is raising awareness about alternative and complementary treatments beyond pharmaceutical drugs. Individuals, doctors, families and workplaces can all help Australians make the best healthcare decisions possible.

Individuals:

Discuss medications with your doctor and pharmacists. It can help to write down questions like:

- Exactly how long should I take this for?
- What are potential side effects?
- Will it affect my ability to drive, work, or care for children?
- Are there complementary therapies you recommend, like diet changes, exercising more, physical therapy, or counselling?
- What are my alternatives to taking this?

Families:

Parents are the first 'drug educators' for children. Research indicates that children grow up to imitate their parents' attitudes and behaviours towards drugs, including pharmaceutical drugs both prescription and over-the-counter.¹

Parents should consider using painkillers as a last resort. Unless the pain is severe, try other strategies such as:

- Ice packs or heat treatments, depending on the source of pain
- Distraction and relaxation
- Comfort with hugs and attention

Doctors:

Healthcare professionals are well placed to intervene before pharmaceutical drugs become a problem. They can:

- Provide information on how to manage pain, stress, anxiety or insomnia without relying on medications long-term
- Provide information on the risks and benefits of using a drug
- Consider supplementary training in pain management and addiction medicine

Workplaces:

Work and finance troubles are among the top causes of stress and anxiety in Australia. Workplaces have an opportunity to consider how this can be lessened or prevented for their employees. Workplaces should also have a formal alcohol and other drug policy that includes the use of over-the-counter and prescribed medications.

An effective policy provides strategies that will assist managers to prevent alcohol and drug problems from happening and provide guidance to help deal with difficult situations if they arise.

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

1. Parenting strategies for reducing adolescent alcohol use: a Delphi consensus study. Ryan, S. M., Jorm, A. F., Kelly, C. M., Hart, L. M., Morgan, A. J., Lubman and Lubman, D. I. 13, s.l. : BMC Public Health, 2011, Vol. 11.

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 treatment services available to support the recovery from alcohol and drug dependence. 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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