



National Prescribing Service Limited

MEDIA RELEASE

2 December 2008

More information needed about complementary medicines

Australians want reliable information on complementary medicines* from trusted sources but are currently turning to friends and industry-sponsored websites, according to the latest findings from research into the information needs of consumers and health professionals conducted by the National Prescribing Service Ltd (NPS).

The NPS research included determining the attitudes of consumers, GPs and pharmacists towards complementary medicines; communication about complementary medicine use; information sources; and information gaps and needs. Reports on the research findings are due for public release in early December.

"This NPS research has revealed that many consumers are interested in getting information about complementary medicines but don't know where to find independent, evidence-based material, which could be exposing them to potential risks," NPS CEO, Dr Lynn Weekes said.

"Most complementary medicine users are self-prescribing without understanding the implications of what they are taking, and in a number of cases, they aren't using the products in the way they are intended. At best, this may mean consumers aren't getting the maximum benefit from the complementary medicine. At worst, they may be putting their health at risk."

"Complementary medicines are still medicines. Though they are generally lower risk, they can have side effects and interactions with other medicines. It's important people realise this and seek out evidence-based information and professional advice. This may include talking to their GP or pharmacist, or calling the NPS Medicines Line before taking a complementary medicine," Dr Weekes said.

The latest findings include:

- More than 70 percent of complementary medicine users surveyed in 2007 had looked for information about complementary medicines and health products in the previous 12 months.
- The most commonly reported information sources used by consumers were family and friends (55 percent), the Internet (51 percent), health food shop workers (38 percent), pharmacists (37 percent), magazines (37 percent), doctors/general practitioners (34 percent), and package inserts/labels/pamphlets (30 percent).
- More than 50 percent of complementary medicine users had accessed the Internet for complementary medicine information in the last 12 months. Most sites reported as favourites for information were industry-sponsored sites.
- Overall, the complementary medicine users surveyed most often reported doctors, the Internet and pharmacists as their *preferred* sources of information.
- The most common things they wanted to find out were: benefits (56 percent), reason for use (41 percent), side effects or risks (24 percent), dose (16 percent), and effects if taken with other medications (12 percent).

** Complementary medicines, also known as natural or alternative medicines, include herbal medicines, vitamin and mineral supplements, other nutritional supplements, traditional medicines such as Ayurvedic medicines and traditional Chinese medicines, homoeopathic medicines, and aromatherapy oils (where they make therapeutic claims).*

For independent information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines, consumers can call **Medicines Line** on **1300 888 763** to talk to a pharmacist between 9am and 6pm Monday to Friday, Eastern Standard Time (EST) for the cost of a local call (mobile calls may cost more).

ENDS

Media enquiries to Katie Butt, Media Adviser, 0419 618 365 or kbutt@nps.org.au



National Prescribing Service Limited

Background information

This NPS research evolved following a series of regulatory changes to the framework of complementary medicine in Australia.

The Office for Complementary Medicines was established in 1999 within the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and it created a world first regulatory framework for complementary medicines. In 2003, the Expert Committee on Complementary Medicines in the Health System was commissioned to report on the status of complementary medicines and therapies in Australia. In the report 'Complementary Medicines in the Australian Health System', the Expert Committee identified a number of concerns and made a series of recommendations to facilitate safe, appropriate and effective use of complementary medicines.

The Committee identified the need for consumers and health professionals to have 'accurate, reliable and independent information' about complementary medicines and to have appropriate skills to 'interpret available information' and 'discriminate between reliable and unreliable information' to allow them to make informed decisions about the use of complementary medicines. The lack of research about consumer and health professional complementary medicines information needs and skills was also identified in the report.

Recommendation 25 in the report suggested that "the Department of Health and Ageing commission a study to determine the complementary medicines information and skills needs of healthcare professionals and consumers, options for conveying this information to stakeholders, and the costs and resources necessary to meet these needs". The research conducted by NPS goes some way to addressing this recommendation.

Research methods

A number of research methods have been used in this study. Preliminary research was conducted in 2005 and 2006 and drew on a range of sources and activities, such as:

- A review of relevant literature from common health and medicine databases
- Qualitative research with consumers suffering from a chronic condition
- A review of calls to NPS medicines information telephone services
- Inclusion of questions on complementary medicines in NPS surveys
- Telephone surveys
- A review of data from the Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) Project and IMS wholesale data on CM sales in 2005 provided by the Complementary Healthcare Council
- Two Supplementary Analyses of Nominated Data (SAND) studies.

The consumer research consisted of a cross-sectional computer-assisted telephone survey conducted in mid 2007 and in-depth interviews with users of complementary medicines across Australia.

Health professional research focused on GPs and community pharmacists. Mail surveys and focus groups were carried out between March and September 2008.

A review of complementary medicines information sources and fact sheets was carried out between June and November 2008.

The National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS) is an independent, non-profit organisation for Quality Use of Medicines funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.