



National Prescribing Service Limited

Fact sheet

January 2004

## Facts and figures on medicine use

- The term 'medicine' encompasses prescription and non-prescription medicines, including vitamins, minerals, herbal and natural therapies as well as complementary healthcare products.
- 'Prescription medicines' are any tablets, capsules, syrups, ointments, inhalers or injections that a doctor has provided a script for. 'Non-prescription medicines' are any tablets, capsules, syrups, ointments, inhalers or injections that are bought over the counter at a chemist, pharmacist, health food or grocery store or recommended by an alternative health practitioner without a doctors' prescription.
- Use of medicines may reduce the need for surgery, hospitalisations and admission to nursing home and aged care facilities. Medicine use, however, is not without risks and is associated with treatment failure, adverse effects, economic waste and ecological change (for example resistance to antibiotics).
- Medicines are widely used. Results from the 1995 Australian National Health Survey indicate the use of medications to be the most common health-related action taken by Australians with 70% of the adults interviewed taking at least one prescription or non-prescription medicine in the two weeks prior to the survey.<sup>1</sup>
- In 1995, of those persons who used medications, 49% of males and 45% of females reported that it was the only action they had taken for their health.<sup>1</sup>
- The most common self-reported reason for using vitamins and minerals was as a preventative measure.<sup>1</sup>
- In 1995, females were more likely than males to report using vitamins or mineral supplements or herbal or natural preparations.<sup>1</sup>
- In 1995, the most common type of medication reportedly used by both males and females was vitamins or minerals (26% of all people using medications), followed by pain relievers (24%) and medications for heart problems or blood pressure (11%).<sup>1</sup>
- Medication use is more common in the elderly. In 1995, the proportion of people who used medications increased with age, from 42% of those aged less than 15 years, to 86% of those aged 65 years and over.<sup>1</sup>
- Use of multiple medicines is also more common in the elderly, significantly increasing the risk of medicine misadventure. Of those aged 85 years and over who used medications in 1995, 17% reported to use only one, 45% used two or three and 38% used four or more.<sup>1</sup>
- The main conditions for which herbal and natural preparations were used were respiratory conditions (10%), musculoskeletal disorders (7%) and digestive conditions (6%).<sup>1</sup>
- Excluding vitamins and minerals, medications for coughs and colds are the most common type of medication used by people under 5 years, and pain relievers are the most common between the ages of 5 and 54. Medications for heart problems or blood pressure are the most common types of medication reportedly used by persons aged 65 years or over.<sup>1</sup>
- Medication related hospital admissions are a significant burden, both economically and socially. In 2002, it was postulated that up to 140 000 hospital admissions were associated with problems with medicines.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2000, more than 200 million prescriptions were dispensed.<sup>2</sup>
- A prescription is written in 84% of consultations with a general practitioner.<sup>3</sup>

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**An independent, Australian organisation for Quality Use of Medicines**

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- In 2003, slightly more than one third (37%) of the population reported to have regularly used prescription medication in the last 12-months<sup>4</sup>. During July 2003 the average number of different types of prescription medicine used at any one time was 1.3.<sup>4</sup>
- Use of non-prescription medication in the last 12-months was similar to prescription medicine, 30% of the population reporting to regularly use non-prescription medication.<sup>4</sup> On average 1.5 different types of non-prescription medicines were taken during the month of July 2003.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2003, when asked about their last prescription medicine the majority of the population (80%) said they knew how to store the medicine, but less (66%) knew the possible side effects, and only half knew what to do if they missed a dose or took too much. A similar low proportion (64%) knew whether the medicine interacted with other medicines.<sup>4</sup>
- Just over half of the population in 2003 (57%) reported asking questions of their general practitioner the last time they were prescribed a new medicine. Even less (27%) asked a pharmacist for information on a new medication.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2003, consumers indicated that they are most likely to ask a doctor (88%) or a pharmacist (80%) if they need information about health or medicines. Just under half (44%) are likely to look up a medical book or ask family or friends for this information and a further 43% indicate they would be likely to use the Internet. Telephoning an organisation or advice line is reportedly the least likely option (17% likely).<sup>4</sup>
- Approximately 400 000 adverse drug/medicines events may be managed in general practice each year.<sup>5</sup>
- It has been estimated that the inappropriate use of medicines in Australia costs approximately 380 million dollars per year in the public hospital system alone.<sup>6</sup>

#### References:

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