



National Prescribing Service Limited

MEDIA RELEASE

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Complementary medicine use: first findings from NPS survey

The use of complementary medicines* by Australians has increased over the past decade but consumers aren't treating them like conventional medicines, according to preliminary findings from research into the information needs of consumers, GPs and pharmacists 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.

"Past consumer research has shown the use of complementary medicine is increasing in Australia, with approximately 67 percent of people taking complementary medicine," NPS CEO, Dr Lynn Weekes said.

However, preliminary findings from NPS research suggest some Australians may be putting their health at risk by using complementary medicines without understanding all the implications of taking them.

The annual NPS Consumer Survey conducted earlier this year revealed only one quarter of respondents considered echinacea to be a medicine and 43 percent of respondents considered Chinese herbal remedies to be medicines.

Like all medicines, complementary medicines may have side effects or interact with other medicines, Dr Weekes says.

"It's certainly encouraging that people are trying to take control of their health by using preventative and holistic measures, but 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," she said.

Preliminary findings from the NPS research include:

- Many consumers believe complementary medicines are 'safer' than conventional medicines but are unaware that some have potential risks such as side effects, toxicity, allergies and adverse interactions with conventional medicines.
- About half of the complementary medicine users surveyed do not report what they are taking to their GP.
- Most complementary medicines were self-prescribed.
- 20-30 percent of people surveyed reported using some complementary medicines for general or preventative health rather than to help treat certain conditions despite no evidence for their use in this way.
- Some of the respondents are using products such as black cohosh, St John's wort and valerian for conditions where they have no evidence of effect, potentially placing their health at risk.

** 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).*

Medicines Line can be contacted on 1300 888 763 between 9am and 6pm Eastern Standard Time (EST) for the cost of a local call (mobile calls may cost more).

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



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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.