

Talking to your Pharmacist Could Provide Relief

More than ever, people are self-medicating with over-the-counter (OTC) drugs when they have an ailment. Possible reasons for this include the number of products that no longer require a prescription, easy access to health information on the Internet, and radio and television commercials in which drug companies promote their products directly to consumers.

Gastrointestinal symptoms are quite common and, if symptoms are mild enough, patients can often be successful in treating their health problems with OTC drugs. However, inappropriate use of OTC medications can hide symptoms of more serious conditions. That is why consulting a pharmacist may be helpful. Pharmacists can help patients decide whether their symptoms are severe enough that they should seek help from a doctor. If symptoms are less severe, pharmacists can assist patients in selecting safe and effective OTC products.

A recent study investigated the role of pharmacist's interventions in people with stomach and/or intestinal symptoms. Pharmacy students



from a university in Belgium invited all pharmacy customers who were attempting to self-medicate their gastrointestinal symptoms to participate in the study. Pharmacy students asked these patients to describe their symptoms. If symptoms were severe, students suggested that the patient see a physician. All other patients were directed to OTC medications that were determined to be most appropriate for the symptoms patients described. Four weeks later, patients returned to the pharmacy for a follow-up visit.

Nearly 600 patients agreed to participate. Most often, initial stomach/intestinal complaints involved heartburn, acid reflux, and a feeling of fullness right after eating a meal. Pharmacy students encouraged 20% of patients to see a doctor because of the severity of symptoms, but 4 weeks later, only 52% of those individuals had followed that advice and consulted a physician.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Family Caregiver Alliance
www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=1104

Nemours Foundation
<http://kidshealth.org/parent/general/body/pharmacist.html>

Based on "Self-Medication of Upper Gastrointestinal Symptoms: A Community Pharmacy Study" by Els Mehuys, Luc Van Bortel, Leen De Bolle, Inge Van Tongelen, Jean-Paul Remon, and Danny De Looze, *The Annals of Pharmacotherapy*, May 2009, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1345/aph.1L647>. For Our Patients is provided by *The Annals* to help explain the latest research and information relating to your medications. These summaries are for informational purposes only and are not a substitute for professional advice from your personal medical provider. If you have questions about this material, you should discuss it with your physician or pharmacist. This summary may be reproduced without permission for not-for-profit educational purposes only. Any other use must be approved by the publisher. © Copyright 2009, Harvey Whitney Books Company, www.hwbooks.com.

FOPF6 DOI 10.1345/fop.1L647

The most common reason for not consulting a doctor was that patients felt their symptoms were not severe enough. Of the patients for whom pharmacy students recommended OTC products, 95% reported that their symptoms were better after 4 weeks and nearly half of them were still taking the medicine.

These results demonstrate that pharmacists can provide valuable assistance to patients who are looking for drug-related answers to their health problems. Furthermore, this study illustrates that when self-medication is appropriate, pharmacists can play an important role in helping patients select the most effective OTC medicines.