

Treating one's own ailments

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A small survey in Peninsular Malaysia indicates a marked tendency among the general population to treat minor ailments by self-medication with over-the-counter drugs and/or traditional medicines. The use of over-the-counter drugs appears to be favoured for skin conditions, general health care, aches and pains, and problems affecting the eyes, ears, mouth, gastro-intestinal tract and respiratory tract. A doctor is usually consulted if self-medication fails.

In order to gain an insight into the health care practices of the general population in Peninsular Malaysia, interviews were conducted by pharmacy students with one adult in each of 92 households during May 1995. A majority of the respondents lived in communities of under 10 000 people. Three-quarters of them had received at least a secondary education and some 60% were females. The interviewees were allowed to give more than one answer to each question.

When asked what action they took to deal with minor ailments, 29% of the respondents said they used traditional medicines and the same percentage said they used over-the-counter drugs; 12% used prescription drugs that were available in the home, 14% consulted a doctor or dentist, and 17% took no action.

If no improvement occurred, 84% of the interviewees said they then consulted a doctor; 10% said they used traditional medicines or home remedies, 7% used over-the-counter drugs, and 2% used prescription drugs available at home; only 2% took no action.

On being asked about health problems encountered during the two weeks preceding the interviews, 42% of the respondents mentioned headache, while cold or influenza, cough, joint pain, stomach disorder, and muscle ache were reported by 33%, 26%, 22%, 22% and 21% respectively. Reference was also made to rashes, cuts, bruises, weight gain, acne, pimples, insomnia, premenstrual syndrome, dandruff and diarrhoea.

For the cases of headache, over-the-counter drugs were taken by 14 of the 39 affected persons, while 6 took traditional medicines or home remedies, 4 took prescription drugs available at home, 6 consulted a doctor, and 9 took no action. Roughly similar response patterns were reported in cases of cold or influenza, joint pain and stomach disorder; none of the persons reporting muscle ache had seen a doctor; among the 24 cases of cough, some form of action, mainly involving the use of over-the-counter drugs and traditional medicines or home remedies, was taken in all cases but one.

When the respondents were asked which health problems were most likely to be self-treated, headache was mentioned by 52%, cold or influenza by 42%, cuts and bruises by 28%, stomach disorders by 28%, cough by 23%, muscle ache by 16% and fever by 14%. The areas in which over-the-counter drugs were

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most likely to be employed were skin problems (according to 36% of respondents), health care in general (34%), aches and pains (21%), ailments of the eyes, ears and mouth

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(17%), the gastrointestinal tract (16%) and the respiratory tract (9%), and conditions specifically affecting women (1%).

When people stopped using over-the-counter drugs the main reasons for doing so were that they were ineffective (49%), that ailments disappeared (63%) or that side-effects occurred (20%). When asked whether they would use the same over-the-counter drugs to treat the same ailments in the future, 67% of the respondents answered affirmatively and 21% said they would not. Satisfaction with the over-the-counter products they had used was expressed by 46% of the respondents, whereas 3.5% expressed dissatisfaction and just over 50% felt unable to make a pronouncement on this matter.

Over 80% of the respondents agreed with the following statements in respect of over-the-counter drugs.

- People should exercise caution when using them.
- Before taking them the instructions on the labels should be read.
- They should not be taken by persons who are unsure about them.
- It is not safe to take them without restriction on quantity.

The study indicates that many people in Peninsular Malaysia undertake self-medication for minor ailments with over-the-counter drugs, traditional medicines and home remedies. In the event that no improvement occurs, however, the great majority of these people are disposed to consult a doctor. ■

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