

Consumer Choice and Access: Over-The-Counter (OTC) Medicines as First-Line Therapy for Common Conditions

We at the Foundation for HealthSMART Consumers believe that self-care with OTCs should be viewed as a first-line treatment protocol for common conditions that are easily self-diagnosed. This allows for consumers to take an active role in their health care and to take responsibility for caring for themselves until a health care provider's expertise is necessary. In addition to being an effective first step in caring for common condition symptoms, self-care can also represent meaningful cost savings for both the health care system and for health care consumers.

The FDA supports OTC self-care with its policy that every medicine be available OTC unless there is a reason for it to be prescription. The 1951 Durham-Humphrey amendments set up the standards for drug classification and require that "...drugs that cannot be used safely without professional supervision be dispensed only by prescription." Drugs that require a health care provider's prescription may be habit-forming, have potential for harmful side-effects, or may be for medical conditions that aren't easily self-diagnosed. According to the amendment, "All other drugs can be sold OTC. A drug must be made available without a prescription if, by following the labeling, consumers can use it safely and effectively without professional guidance."¹

Savings with OTCs for both the Health Care System and the Consumer

OTC medicines have had a big impact on the health care economy. According to a 1997 study by the Consumer Healthcare Products Association (CHPA), the wide variety of medicines available OTC saves the health care system about \$20 billion each year. This takes into account prescription drug costs, doctors' visits, insurance costs, lost time from work, as well as travel.¹ Just in the category of heartburn alone, it is estimated that consumer use of OTC medications saves the U.S. health care system \$757 million annually, and in turn saves the average consumer \$174 annually.²

A Northwestern University study determined that the use of certain OTCs to treat upper respiratory infections saves the U.S. health care system and economy \$4.75 billion annually.² **OTC medicines are commonly priced between 50% and 90% lower than the original branded prescription medicine.** For example, a 30-day supply of Claritin (loratadine) cost \$96 as a prescription, but the price following the OTC switch was lowered to just \$22. Using OTC medicines not only saves the difference in cost of a prescription medicine, but also cuts the out-of-pocket costs associated with visiting a health care

provider's office. In addition, there is less time spent traveling to and waiting at the health care provider's office.³

Consumer Access and the Importance of Education

OTCs provide convenient access to treatment for common conditions. OTC medicines are available at over 750,000 retailers in the U.S., including grocery stores, warehouse outlets, and discount department stores, while prescription drugs are available at only approximately 58,000 pharmacies across the country.² However, with this widespread availability comes the need for consumer understanding and responsibility in using OTC products properly.

For example, according to the FDA, the most important component of OTC self-care, other than the medicine itself, is consumer understanding of the OTC label.⁴ The chance of intentional or unintentional misuse of medicines (dosing, duration, etc) exists for both OTC and prescription medicines. However, since OTCs are used without the direction of a health care provider, protocols exist to make the OTC medicine labeling easy to read and understand.¹ The OTC Drug Facts label was standardized in 1999 and has gone through rigorous research to ensure the format meets readability and user-friendliness standards.²

In conclusion, the availability of OTC medicines has a positive impact on both the health care system and the health care consumer. Unfettered access to OTC medicines for treating symptoms of common conditions saves the consumer out-of-pocket costs, while also benefiting the health care system by keeping costs down for health care services. Consumer-friendly programming providing knowledge about appropriate self-care treatment, as well as the importance of understanding OTC labels and using OTC medicines properly, is paramount to managing health care costs in the U.S.

References

¹ "Information for Consumers: Drugs Now Available Without a Prescription," FDA website, available at <http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm143547.htm>. Accessed December 28, 2010.

² "Quality Healthcare with OTCs," CHPA website, available at http://www.chpa-info.org/issues/Quality_Healthcare.aspx. Accessed on December 20, 2010.

³ "White paper on the benefits of OTC medicines in the United States," Report of the Consumer Healthcare Products Association's Clinical/Medical Committee, *Pharmacy Today*, October 2010, page 73. Available at http://www.chpa-info.org/media/resources/r_6842.pdf.

⁴ "Over-the-Counter Medicines: What's Right for You?" FDA website, available at <http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/UnderstandingOver-the-CounterMedicines/Choosingtherightover-the-countermedicineOTCs/ucm150299.htm>. Accessed on December 20, 2010.