



## Over-the-counter drugs

When you think about drug use and young people, drugs like alcohol or cannabis might quickly come to mind. But we know from recent surveys that the overuse of over-the-counter drugs is becoming a problem with some young people. These drugs when taken as intended by appropriately following the instructions provided by a doctor, pharmacist or the instructions on the packet, can safely treat specific mind and body symptoms. It is when over-the-counter drugs are misused by taking different quantities or when symptoms aren't present that these drugs may affect a person in ways very similar to illicit drugs. For example, stimulants such as Ritalin achieve their effects by acting on the same neurotransmitter systems as cocaine.

### Australian School Students Alcohol and Drug (ASSAD) Survey

The harms associated with pharmaceuticals are not just related to the misuse of prescription drugs but also the misuse of over-the-counter drugs such as analgesics (that contain codeine). Misuse is reported to be increasing and is emerging as an issue of concern. Codeine is used to provide relief from a number of conditions including mild to severe pain, diarrhoea and dry cough. Misusing codeine, including taking more codeine than recommended on the packet, increases the risk of side effects such as dizziness, lethargy and blurred vision, and puts a person at risk of an overdose. Care should be taken when using these drugs including those that contain paracetamol.

The most common reasons for using analgesics for males and females in the 2014 ASSAD survey was to help ease the pain associated with a headache/migraine and to ease the symptoms of a cold or 'flu'. In the national survey of school students aged 12 to 17 years:

- the use of over-the-counter medications such as Panadol was extremely high<sup>1</sup> with 93.4% having used these medications in their lifetime
- seven in ten (70%) had used analgesics in the past month
- females were more likely to have used analgesics in their lifetime. About one in five (20.8%) reported using analgesics to help with menstrual pain
- 16.2% of males, at all ages, used analgesics to help relieve pain from a sports injury.

### The messages to give your children about over-the-counter drugs

- **Over-the-counter drugs have the potential to cause harm.** Some young people may think that prescription and over-the-counter drugs are safer than other drugs because they are legal and prescribed by a doctor.
- **These drugs should only be used as directed.** Young people who do not think that using prescription and over-the counter drugs is harmful may be more likely to use them for non-medical reasons than those who view them as harmful.
- **Using pharmaceutical drugs without a prescription from a doctor, or selling or giving them to someone else is illegal.** It is also against the law to forge or alter a prescription.
- **Try alternatives before using medications.** Talk about alternative ways your children can relieve a headache before taking analgesics such as: eating food or drinking water to hydrate the body, lying down in a dark room with a cold compress across the forehead or back of the neck, or going for a walk and getting some fresh air. (These are suggestions only and should not be taken as medical advice).

**Any drug has the potential to cause harm.**

<sup>1</sup> Mental Health Commission (2016). Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey 2014: Western Australian Results. Unpublished analysis.