



Original Research

Swedish teenagers and over-the-counter analgesics – Responsible, casual or careless use

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Abstract

Background: Teenagers in Sweden were given greater access as consumers of OTC drugs in 2009 after the reregulation of the pharmacy market, which allowed for the establishment of private pharmacies and sale of specific over-the-counter (OTC) drugs in retail stores and gas stations. Increased access to OTC drugs could provide new opportunities for self-care but attenuates the opportunity for the traditional expert surveillance of pharmacists, thus increasing the possibility of inappropriate OTC drug use.

Objectives: Views of 16–19 year old Swedish teenagers on OTC drugs, with special regard to analgesic drugs were explored and described, based on the following questions: How and where did they acquire their knowledge and attitudes regarding OTC drugs? What perceptions did they have about the use of OTC drugs?

Methods: A qualitative approach with a descriptive design was chosen. Data were collected in 2011 with 10 focus group discussions with high school students aged 16–19 years from different parts of Sweden. A total of 77 teenagers participated, 33 males and 44 females. A manifest qualitative content analysis was performed.

Results: While most teenagers appeared to have responsible attitudes toward OTC drugs and their use, some teenagers had attitudes that ranged from casual to careless. The focus group discussions also revealed knowledge gaps among teenagers regarding OTC drugs, and the significant influence of parents and peers on their OTC drug use.

Conclusions: This study provides insight into how vulnerable some teenagers could be as new consumers of OTC drugs and suggested that educational efforts could be geared toward parents as well as teenagers.

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Keywords: Teenagers; OTC drugs; Analgesics; Sweden; Qualitative content analysis

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Introduction

This study focused on teenagers as consumers of over-the-counter (OTC) drugs in Sweden. The provision of healthcare in Sweden has become more consumer-oriented, as in many European countries.¹ The reregulation of the state-owned monopoly of the Swedish pharmacy market in 2009 allowed establishment of private pharmacies and the sale of specific OTC drugs in retail outlets such as grocery stores or in gas stations.^{2–4} The primary aim of the reregulation was to increase accessibility to medicines and to reduce the cost of OTC drugs for Swedish citizens.² Decisions about which OTC drugs that could be distributed and sold by the retail stores were made by the Medical Products Agency of Sweden. Of particular relevance to the present study was that a customer had to be a minimum of 18 years of age to buy these drugs outside the pharmacies.³ This was in direct contrast to countries such as New Zealand and the UK, where these drugs are classified as ‘general sale medicines’, and could be purchased from any retail outlet, without restrictions.^{5,6}

OTC drugs (medicinal products that do not require prescriptions) are sold worldwide, although the regulation systems differ between countries.^{2,7–9} OTC drugs sold by retail stores in Sweden include analgesics (pain relievers) such as paracetamol, ibuprofen and acetylsalicylic acid.¹⁰ International studies have revealed that these three analgesics are among the most commonly reported OTC drugs used to treat symptoms of common cold and flu such as fever, sore throat pain, joint and muscle pain and headache.^{8,11–13} However, they are not harmless,¹⁴ and not all consumers may realize that prolonged daily use and intake of high doses of paracetamol can result in liver damage,¹⁴ or that ibuprofen can cause gastrointestinal damage, bleeding and ulcers.¹⁵ A Swedish survey from 2007/2008 showed that 1.25 packages of OTC drugs were sold to children (0–18 years of age) every 3 months.¹⁶

OTC drug *abuse* has been broadly defined as the systematic overuse of non-prescription drugs.¹⁷ It is a serious and global health challenge which places substantial burdens on many health-care systems.^{14,18} In addition, self-care and alternative medications are growing trends which increase the risk of drug *misuse* (frequent, though not systematic use of drugs above recommended dose¹⁹), intentional or accidental. An English study revealed that one out of six students

exceeded the maximum dose of mild analgesics.¹² A national survey in the USA noted that OTC drug abuse had increased in the age group 18–25 years between 2002 and 2005.¹⁷ A more recent study has revealed that many children and adolescents engage in such abuse.¹⁸ Another American study from 2000 showed that 40% of the intentional drug abuse among children and teenagers aged 6–19 years involved OTC drugs.²⁰ Unsafe use of paracetamol among adolescents and young adults in the US was also shown by Shone et al.²¹

The area of interest in this study was thus young people in the later ‘teen’ years of age, more specifically teenagers between 16 and 19 years of age. It is during these years of age that teenagers in Sweden approach and reach the age when they become legally eligible to buy drugs outside pharmacies, and possibly become more active as consumers. These teenagers are in phase of life, adolescence, which is characterized by fast growth and development, and physiological, sexual and emotional changes.²¹ According to Eriksson (1968), humans undergo five different phases in life, all characterized by specific needs.²² During the identity phase, which is the last phase before adulthood (13–18, the ‘teen’ years of age), the individual is trying to establish a strong identity.²² This phase involves independence and emotional disengagement from the family and an increased need to belong to a group of peers.²³ Faced with the uncertainty of the adult roles ahead, they may “overidentify with cliques and crowds to the point of apparent loss of individuality”, and thus become vulnerable to the behavior codes of their peers.²²

The term ‘consumer socialization’ refers to “the process by which young people acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their effective functioning as consumers in the marketplace”.²⁴ Previous research has shown that family, peers, schools and media are important agents in young people’s consumer socialization, as they can contribute to both desirable and undesirable consumer behavior.²⁵ Increased access to OTC drugs could give Swedish teenagers new opportunities to make their own shopping and consumption decisions regarding self-medication. However, the ability to buy OTC drugs outside pharmacies gave little opportunity for the traditional expert surveillance and control of pharmacists.^{21,26} As such, the potential for error and for careless or inappropriate use of OTC drugs existed.^{21,26} This study explored the views of

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