Over The Counter Codeine Use By People Who Inject Drugs Regularly In Australia

Introduction

In Australia traditionally low-dose codeine tablets have been readily available in pharmacies (‘over the counter’, OTC). Recent changes have seen higher restrictions placed on OTC codeine sales. This has resulted in higher pharmacist involvement in sale of OTC codeine pain relief products as well as reduced pack sizes to a maximum of five day supply.

OTC codeine is mainly used for the relief of mild to moderate pain. OTC codeine medications vary in codeine quantity and are only available in combinations (usually with paracetamol or decongestants). There are associated health concerns with the prolonged use of codeine-most notably the risk of liver damage.

There are also health risks associated with chronic ingestion of combination drugs such as ibuprofen. Recent data has shown cases of serious harm in users of codeine/ibuprofen combination drugs. Complications seen included gastrointestinal disease, renal failure, anaemia and low blood potassium (Frei, Nielsen, Tobin, & Dobbin, 2010). These harms are typical of those associated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen. In 2009, Nurofen Plus® (codeine/ibuprofen) and Panadeine® (codeine/paracetamol) were reported by participants in the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) as the most commonly used brands of OTC codeine. In 2010 data has been collected to further investigate the use of OTC codeine amongst this sample.

Aim

❖ To investigate the pain and non-pain reasons for using OTC codeine amongst a sample of PWID regularly

❖ To investigate the pain and non-pain reasons for using OTC codeine amongst a sample of PWID regularly

Method

The IDRS has collected directly comparable data in each Australian jurisdiction since the year 2000, allowing shifts in drug trends to be placed in a rich and detailed background context. The IDRS is a strategic surveillance system that has been monitoring use, price, purity and availability of illicit drugs

In June 2010 face to face interviews were conducted with 902 people who inject drugs regularly (PWID). Participants were asked questions investigating extra-medical use of OTC codeine (use for non-pain reasons), acute and chronic pain and pain management, frequency of use, main brands used, the reason for use, and the amount of tablets/capsules used per dose. This data was analysed using PASW Statistics 18.

This project is coordinated nationally by National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) in New South Wales.

Results

Use of OTC codeine

In 2010, fifty-two percent of PWID reported having ever used OTC codeine. Thirty-five percent reported using OTC codeine in the last six months. The median number of tablets/capsules taken at one time was three, range 1-250. The median dosage the last time they took OTC codeine was 26mg of codeine. One participant reported using more than 100 tablets in a session. Fifty-two percent of users took more than the recommended dose (2 tablets) last time they took OTC codeine.

OTC codeine and other drugs

The majority of all PWID and those PWID who had recently used OTC codeine reported that heroin was their drug of choice. There were no significant differences in the drug of choice reported between the two groups.

Brand of OTC codeine

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 52% had used a brand which administered the codeine in combination with ibuprofen. Codeine in combination with paracetamol was administered by 36% of the respondents. The most commonly used brand was Nurofen Plus® (45%).

OTC codeine and pain

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 137 had experienced pain in the last four weeks, one third (33%) of users reported the pain to be moderate. The majority (59%) also reported the pain to be acute/short-term pain.

OTC codeine and non-pain – extra-medical use

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 64 reported using for non-pain reasons. The most common non-pain reasons for codeine use were to go to sleep and to substitute for heroin or illicit opioids.

Conclusion

❖ OTC codeine was most commonly used to relieve pain.
❖ OTC codeine was also used for non-pain reasons. The most common reason was to substitute for heroin or illicit opioids.
❖ The median number of tablets used in a session by both all users of OTC codeine (3 tablets) and users of OTC codeine for non-pain reasons (6 tablets), was above the recommended dose (2 tablets).
❖ Nurofen Plus®, a codeine/ibuprofen combination drug, was the most commonly used brand of OTC codeine in 2010.
❖ The high number of OTC codeine users taking above the recommended dose of codeine combination drugs (paracetamol and ibuprofen) indicates this group could be at risk of adverse events associated with these medications.

Acknowledgements & contact details

Thank you to the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, research partners around the country that collect the data each year, previous national team coordinators and Chief Investigators, key experts, various departments that provide indicator data and finally to the regular injecting participants that provide the vital component that allows close monitoring of the Australian illicit drug market to continue.

The current national coordinators Natasha Sindicich and Jennifer Staford.

Correspondence:
Sheena Arora
National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre
University of New South Wales
Ph: 02 9385 0254
Email: s.arora@unsw.edu.au
Web: http://www.scribd.com

References:


Introduction

In Australia traditionally low-dose codeine tablets have been readily available in pharmacies (‘over the counter’, OTC). Recent changes have seen higher restrictions placed on OTC codeine sales. This has resulted in higher pharmacist involvement in sale of OTC codeine pain relief products as well as reduced pack sizes to a maximum of five day supply.

OTC codeine is mainly used for the relief of mild to moderate pain. OTC codeine medications vary in codeine quantity and are only available in combinations (usually with paracetamols or decongestants). There are associated health concerns with the prolonged use of codeine most notably the risk of liver damage.

There are also health risks associated with chronic ingestion of combination drugs such as ibuprofen. Recent data has shown cases of serious harm in users of codeine/ibuprofen combination drugs. Complications seen included gastrointestinal disease, renal failure, anaemia and low blood potassium (Frei, Nielsen, Tobin, & Dobbin, 2010). These harms are typical of those associated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen. In 2009, Nurofen Plus® (codeine/ibuprofen) and Panadeine® (codeine/paracetamol) were reported by participants in the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) as the most commonly used brands of OTC codeine. In 2010 data has been collected to further investigate the use of OTC codeine amongst this sample.

Aim

❖ To investigate trends in the use of OTC codeine amongst a sample of PWID regularly
❖ To investigate the pain and non-pain reasons for using OTC codeine amongst a sample of PWID regularly

Method

The IDRS has collected directly comparable data in each Australian jurisdiction since the year 2000, allowing shifts in drug trends to be placed in a rich and detailed background context. The IDRS is a strategic surveillance system that has been monitoring use, price, purity and availability of illicit drugs.

In June 2010 face to face interviews were conducted with 902 people who inject drugs regularly (PWID). Participants were asked questions investigating extra-medical use of OTC codeine (use for non-pain reasons), acute and chronic pain and pain management, frequency of use, main brands used, the reason for use, and the amount of tablets/capsules used per dose. This data was analysed using PASW Statistics 18.

This project is coordinated nationally by National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) in New South Wales.

Results

Use of OTC codeine

In 2010, fifty-two percent of PWID reported having ever used OTC codeine. Thirty-five percent reported using OTC codeine in the last six months. The median number of tablets/capsules taken at one time was three, range 1-250. The median dosage the last time they took OTC codeine was 26mg of codeine. One participant reported using more than 100 tablets in a session. Fifty-two percent of users took more than the recommended dose (2 tablets) last time they took OTC codeine.

OTC codeine and other drugs

The majority of all PWID and those PWID who had recently used OTC codeine reported that heroin was their drug of choice. There were no significant differences in the drug of choice reported between the two groups.

Brand of OTC codeine

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 52% had used a brand which administered the codeine in combination with ibuprofen. Codeine in combination with paracetamol was administered by 36% of the respondents. The most commonly used brand was Nurofen Plus® (45%).

Figure 1: Proportion of PWID who had recently used OTC codeine brand by dosage

OTC codeine and pain

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 137 had experienced pain in the last four weeks, one third (33%) of users reported the pain to be moderate. The majority (59%) also reported the pain to be acute/short-term pain.

OTC codeine and non-pain – extra-medical use

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 64 reported using for non-pain reasons. The most common non-pain reasons for codeine use were to go to sleep and to substitute for heroin or illicit opioids.

Conclusion

❖ OTC codeine was most commonly used to relieve pain.
❖ OTC codeine was also used for non-pain reasons. The most common reason was to substitute for heroin or illicit opioids.
❖ The median number of tablets used in a session by both all users of OTC codeine (3 tablets) and users of OTC codeine for non-pain reasons (6 tablets), was above the recommended dose (2 tablets).
❖ Nurofen Plus®, a codeine/ibuprofen combination drug, was the most commonly used brand of OTC codeine in 2010.
❖ The high number of OTC codeine users taking above the recommended dose of codeine combination drugs (paracetamol and ibuprofen) indicates this group could be at risk of adverse events associated with these medications.

Acknowledgements & contact details

Thank you to the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, research partners around the country that collect the data each year, previous national team coordinators and Chief Investigators, key experts, various departments that provide indicator data and finally to the regular injecting participants that provide the vital component that allows close monitoring of the Australian illicit drug market to continue.

The current national coordinators Natasha Sindicich and Jennifer Staford.

Correspondence:
Sheena Arora
National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre
University of New South Wales
Ph: 02 9385 0254
Email: s.arora@unsw.edu.au
Web: