



# Responsible Self-Care and Self-Medication

A Worldwide Review of Consumer Surveys

A new review of consumer surveys carried out over the past 10 years around the world confirms that OTC medicines are used cautiously and responsibly and that they help to educate people on the practice of healthy living habits and self-care.

## Key Findings

- 1 People throughout the world suffer common health problems and their symptoms in roughly the same frequency. Surveys conducted in numerous countries indicate that 9 out of every 10 people suffer from at least one aspect of unwellness during the course of any 4-week period.
- 2 People generally respond in the same way to these problems, letting the condition run its course about half the time, turning to non-prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medications about a quarter of the time.
- 3 People are cautious and careful when they do use OTCs, and are not prompted to an over reliance as a result of advertising. Further, most people in all of the nations surveyed read the label carefully before taking an OTC medicine the first time.
- 4 People are overwhelmingly satisfied with the non-prescription medicines they use – to the point where many believe that OTC medicines can be as effective for the relevant condition as prescription medicines.
- 5 In recent years, a wider access to these medicines has helped educate people to the practice of self-care. There is an increasing demand by consumers for reliable information about personal healthcare.
- 6 There appears to be no fundamental difference between developed and developing countries in people's aspirations to participate, to their level of ability and preference, in healthcare activities that affect their lives. A large number of independent surveys conducted in all continents provide important insights into how consumers have been evaluating and using non-prescription medicines over the past 20 years and how their perception of OTC medicines is changing.

## Summary

A large number of independent surveys conducted in all continents provide important insights into how consumers have been evaluating and using non-prescription medicines over the past 20 years and how their perception of OTC medicines is changing.

This document summarizes the striking similarities among people around the world – representing more than one billion human beings from nations with diverse cultural, economic and political characteristics.

Feeling unwell and suffering from non-chronic ailments is a very common experience: Indians and South Africans get the same ailments, in roughly the same frequency, as do the Japanese and Mexicans.

People around the world tend to treat these conditions in much the same conservative way. Almost 50% either wait for the problem to run its course or use a home remedy. About 25% visit a doctor or use a prescription medicine previously obtained for the same condition. The remaining 25% turn to OTC medicines.

The surveys show that OTC medicines are:

- Needed to treat common health problems
- Well respected by consumers worldwide
- Used appropriately, carefully and safely
- Appreciated for their wide availability
- Seen by many as being as effective as prescription medicines

Importantly, OTC medicines are helping to educate consumers to the practice of healthy living habits. People are becoming more confident that they have a role to play in their own healthcare and they believe that a modern health-care system should offer increasing opportunities to access OTC medicines.

## The Surveys

Independent published consumer surveys with specific emphasis on consumers' practices and attitudes regarding self-care and self-medication were collected and reviewed for this study.

In the past, responsible self medication has developed particularly strongly in developed economies. Today however, all countries rich and poor, developed and developing, are coming to appreciate the contribution to individual and public health that self-care and self-medication can make.

In this booklet the objective is to compare and contrast the results of consumer surveys from as wide a variety of countries as possible, especially including developing and emerging economies. Data are therefore included from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, France, Germany, Guatemala, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Nepal, Portugal, South Africa, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and Venezuela.

It can sometimes be difficult to make valid comparisons because studies have originally been conducted with their own objectives and research methodology and because of significant differences in health care systems, culture, education, economics, and religion. Nevertheless careful comparison and analysis allowed some instructive conclusions to be drawn in a number of areas.

This booklet presents a selection of illustrative and representative examples from the surveys. For further information readers are invited to go to the source material cited on pages 13 and 14.

## What is Self-Care and Self-Medication?

Self-care may be defined as the care taken by individuals towards their own health and well being, including the care extended to their family members and others.

In practice self-care includes the actions people take to stay fit and maintain good physical and mental health; meet social and psychological needs; prevent illness or accidents; avoid unnecessary risks; care and self-medicate for minor ailments and long-term conditions; and maintain health and well being after an acute illness or discharge from hospital.

Self-medication is the treatment of common health problems with medicines especially designed and labeled for use without medical supervision and approved as safe and effective for such use.

Medicines for self-medication are often called 'non-prescription' or 'over the counter' (OTC) and are available without a doctor's prescription through pharmacies. In some countries OTC products are also available in supermarkets and other outlets. Medicines that require a doctor's prescription are called prescription products (Rx products).

Self-medication with OTC medicines is sometimes referred to as 'responsible' self-medication to distinguish this from the practice of purchasing and using a prescription medicine without a doctor's prescription. This is irresponsible (and potentially even dangerous) 'self-prescription', and has no place in self-care or (responsible) self-medication.

## Results of the Review

### Common Health Problems

The surveys indicate that people in all parts of the world encounter the same common health problems in roughly the same frequency. It does not seem to matter where or how they live. Common colds, headaches, digestive problems and body aches and pains do not discriminate by nationality, culture or climate; if 85% of all Australians catch a cold at least once a year, so do about two thirds of the British, Indians, Americans and Spanish (table 1).

While incidence levels for each of the studied health conditions vary from country to country, the similarities are obvious. The common cold is the most frequent ailment in each of the five countries compared here, followed by headaches, digestive problems and body aches and pains. On average, people suffer from at least one aspect of unwellness during the course of any 4-week period.

Table 1  
Incidence of common conditions (at least once a year - % of population)

Condition	U.K	U.S	India	Australia	Spain
Colds	66	60	69	85	73
Headaches	59	N/A	48	63	71
Digestive Problems	57	59	36	58	45
Muscle Aches	52	37	42	38	40

## Treating Health Problems

Not only do people get the same every-day health problems, they generally respond in the same careful way. About fifty percent do nothing or treat symptoms with home remedies such as salt water gargles, ice packs or hot water bottles. This conservatism effectively refutes the myth that people over-use non-prescription medicines, or “take a pill for every ill”.

Roughly a quarter visit a doctor or treat themselves with a prescription medicine obtained earlier for the same condition. Only a quarter turn to over-the-counter medicines to treat sicknesses and/or their symptoms.

The percentage of ailments for which people in eight nations either didn't seek treatment or relied on a home remedy is illustrated below. Significantly perhaps, the highest percentages of non - or home remedy treatment are in the United-States and the United-Kingdom – countries with strong television viewership and significant OTC advertising.

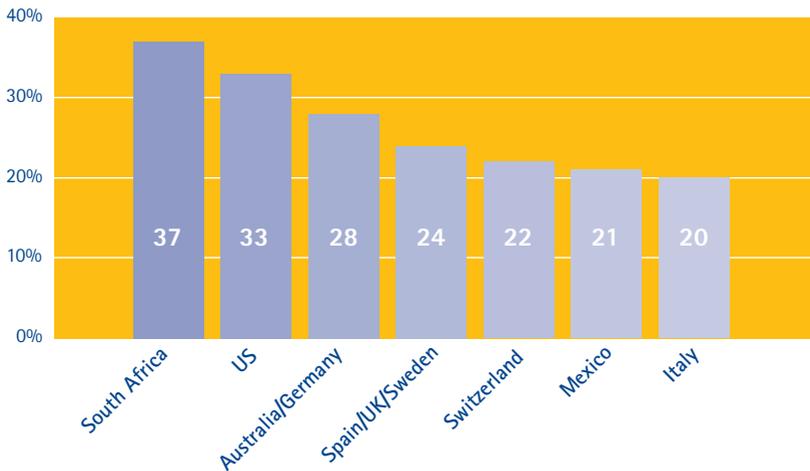
Percentage of Common Conditions receiving no treatment or a home remedy.



## Treatment with OTCs

The chart below shows the percentage of problems treated with non-prescription medications by consumers in 10 nations. The percentages are the highest in the United States and in South Africa. While in a developed country like the US many patients consider self-treatment with over-the-counter medicines as a cost and time-saving alternative to doctor visits for common ailments, a country like South Africa perhaps relies on self-medication more as a major contributor to health maintenance because of lower levels of infrastructure and professional staff.

Percentage of common conditions treated with OTCs

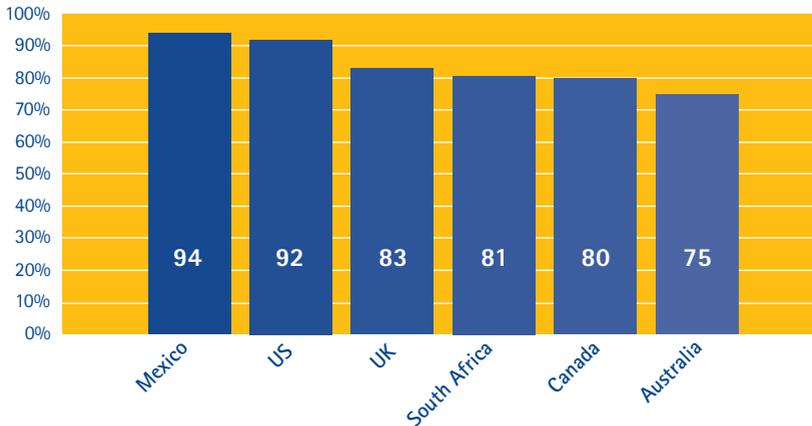


A panel of doctors was consulted in South Africa (1988) to determine if the OTC medicines selected were suitable for the ailments in question. The doctors agreed, in the overwhelming majority of cases, that self-medication is practiced responsibly and sensibly by individuals. They also confirmed that self-medication is used as an appropriate complement to medical consultation rather than as an alternative.

## Satisfaction with OTCs

In every nation in which the question is posed, people are overwhelmingly satisfied with the non-prescription medicines they use (below), from a high of 94% in Mexico to a "low" of 75% in Australia.

Percentage of consumers satisfied with OTC Medicines



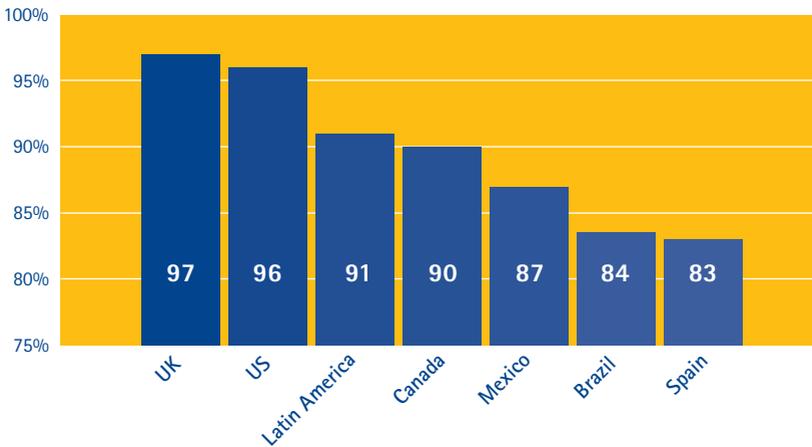
When specifically asked to compare prescription and OTC medicines, more than 90% of the Japanese, 76% of Colombians and almost 60% of Canadians find OTC medicines just as effective for some problems as prescription medicines.

Nearly half of the Chinese believe that OTC medicines are safer than prescription medicines when used as directed.

## Reading the label

Importantly, researchers found that high percentages of the population in each country said they always read the label or package insert completely before taking a non-prescription medicine for the first time (below) – from a high 97% in the United-Kingdom to a “low” of 83% in Spain.

Percentage of consumers that read labels completely the first time they use a medicine



## Side effects, directions for use, limit-of-use warnings

As also illustrated in the previous paragraph, a multilateral survey carried out in 8 Latin American countries in 2002 showed that 91% of Latin Americans read the label the first time they used a non-prescription medicine because they wanted to be reassured that "it would provide the expected relief without causing side effects or adverse reactions". In the same survey, consumers' cautious attitudes toward non-prescription medicines were confirmed by their wish to have more accessible information on labels about side effects. These findings coincide with some of the main conclusions derived from two studies carried out in the United-States and Europe respectively in 2001 and 2002.

As far as directions for use are concerned, a Chinese survey (2004) showed that most consumers take their oral medicines strictly as directed, in the appropriate doses and at the right time.

One may also note an older study conducted in 1989 in the US which concluded that almost all OTC medicines are used for considerably less time than the standard 10-day limit-of-use period.

## Self-Care awareness

This cautiousness when using OTC medicines can simply be explained with the finding that the practice of self-care and self-medication is primarily a philosophical attitude. In China (2004), where over 40% of urban consumers declare being actively involved in diagnosing and treating their own health problems, more than 50% demonstrate "responsible healthcare behaviors" such as exercising, improving nutrition, and having regular physical examinations. In France (2001), 81% of the people who practice responsible self-medication say that pharmacists' advice on healthy lifestyle and eating habits are essential.

Overall, people around the world are becoming aware of the importance of practicing self-care. In Portugal (2004), 64% of consumers share the opinion that it is “[their] duty to know and understand [their] body”. The trend for the future is clear and illustrated in a Canadian survey (2005) where 44% of consumers said that they had practiced more self-care over the past year than the year before, and 52% expected to be practicing more self-care in future years. Ninety percent of them agreed that it is important for Governments to provide the public with tools to practice self-care.

## Education and OTCs

While self-medication usage levels (as opposed to brand choice) does not seem to be influenced by advertising, it appears that education, healthcare awareness and an understanding of trends in more advanced societies do play a role.

In India (1995), it was shown that literate people were 76% more likely to self-medicate than illiterate people. Other studies (Singapore 1980; Brazil 1997; China 2004; Nepal 2002) confirmed that self-medication increases with education level and more generally that self-care improves with greater healthcare awareness.

In Portugal (2004), a country that has experienced profound economic and social changes in the last 30 years and where the education level has increased tremendously, 74% of consumers believe that they should have access to many more non-prescription medicines. “After all, OTC medicines have existed for a long time in modern societies, so we must update ourselves” is an opinion shared by 87% of the Portuguese.

## Sources of self-medication advice and information

Positive and responsible attitudes towards self-care and self-medication are spreading throughout the world. There is a demand by consumers for more information and particularly for reliable sources of information about healthcare in general and medicines in particular. In a comprehensive survey, members of patients' organizations expressed their strongest agreement with the need for improving healthcare systems through accurate, relevant and comprehensive information, to help them make informed decisions about treatment (IAPO 2006).

Whether one lives in a developing country or in a developed one, the sources of information are similar. A person may seek advice from 'an older person in your household who possesses the knowledge of simple herbal remedies for common illnesses' (Nepal, 2002) or with a pharmacist because they can 'provide a good help to assess the symptoms' and 'spend time explaining how to use the medication properly' (Brazil 1997, Singapore 2005). Or one may purchase an OTC medicine 'based on a previous medical recommendation' (Mexico, 1999).

Product labels are also a good source of information for the consumer and should always be easily accessible. In China for example, 70% of the consumers select the OTC medicine through reading the specifications before purchase.

Television advertising appears to have a limited impact with respect to overall non-prescription medicine use: in Brazil (1997), 81% of consumers disagreed with the statement: "I customarily purchase medicines advertised on TV". In Italy, between 1977 and 1987 – a period known in Europe for its large increase in television advertising, visits to physicians increased by 20% while the use of OTC medicines increased by only 2%. There were similar results in all the major European countries.

Today the internet is emerging as a major source of information on health issues and (with appropriate quality control) offers great promise in helping people with self-care.

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