

Media Release

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What parents use and why

Parents coughing up for potentially harmful medicine, poll finds

Australian parents are spending millions of dollars a year on cough and cold medicines that could harm young children, new research has found.

The latest Australian Child Health Poll, released today, has found Australians are spending an estimated \$67 million annually on cough and cold medicines for children aged under 15-years.

And a third of children aged under six-years receive over-the-counter cough and cold medicines, a product group that the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) warns could harm children of this age.

Director of the poll, paediatrician Dr Anthea Rhodes said: "We all struggle to cope with our kids' coughs and colds over winter, but for young children these medicines are known to be ineffective, and in some cases potentially harmful.

"What's particularly disturbing is that among parents who are giving these products to their young children, 74 per cent do so on the advice of a pharmacist, and 64 per cent on the advice of a doctor," Dr Rhodes said.

"Now that we have this information, we need to act on it. Parents of young children who are advised to use an over-the-counter cough or cold medicine should challenge the advice; if your child is under six years of age, don't buy it."

Dr Rhodes said the research revealed that cough and cold formulas were not the only non-prescribed treatment being used to treat children across Australia despite a lack of supporting evidence.

She said parents may see over-the-counter medicines as an appealing quick fix, when in reality they could be an expensive placebo at best, and at worse, potentially harmful.

"We were surprised to learn that, nationally, we're spending an estimated \$74 million a year on vitamins and supplements for children aged less than 15-years," Dr Rhodes said.

"About half of all Australian children and teenagers are receiving these supplements, even though there are no proven health benefits where diet is normal and there is no established nutritional deficiency.

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“For example, among this group, three out of four parents are giving their children vitamins to boost their immune system even though there is no clear evidence that these products can have that effect.”

Primary school-aged children are most frequently given vitamins or supplements by their parents (50 per cent), followed by teenagers (45 per cent) and pre-schoolers (39 per cent).

Dr Rhodes said Australians were constantly bombarded by commercially motivated messages presenting as health advice, and that healthcare professionals had an obligation to educate Australian parents that, where their children are concerned, there’s no quick fix or magic pill.

“The most common type of cough is the one that follows a cold. Most children don’t need any specific treatment beyond rest and time. The age old recipe of plenty of exercise and outdoor play, adequate sleep and a healthy diet is still the best medicine for keeping our children well,” Dr Rhodes said.

Other key findings from the fourth Australian Child Health Poll include:

- 92 per cent of children have received an over-the-counter medicine in the past 12 months and 65 per cent have received more than one type of medicine
- Although there is no evidence it helps, a substantial proportion of parents give their children paracetamol or ibuprofen to treat cough (27 per cent) or induce sleep (10 per cent)
- One in seven parents use over-the-counter medicines to aid sleep or relax their children for travel, such as on flights or car trips.

For more information, including media material, see www.childhealthpoll.org.au

Data Source

The fourth Australian Child Health Poll is a survey of a nationally representative sample of more than 2,150 adults aged 18 years and older. Collectively respondents had a total of 3,992 children. The survey is conducted by an independent research agency on behalf of The Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne. Each sample is subsequently weighted to reflect the latest Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.