

The Quick Fix: Overuse of Medications in the US

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These days, most of us are likely to choose “quick fix” methods for health issues as minor as a headache. Usually, the quick fix involves some kind of pill. Is it convenient? Of course. But, is it healthy? Probably not.

When it comes to minor health problems, 81% of American adults use OTC medications as their main defense. The number of prescriptions in the US increased by a whopping 39% between 1999 and 2009, according to a 2010 survey from the [Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation](#). A [2014 survey](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated 48% of us have used at least one prescription drug in the past 30 days – that’s 5% more than in 1999-2000. About 31% of us have used two or more prescription drugs in the past month, compared with 25% in 1999-2000.

Our generation has become alarmingly dependent on medication, and according to experts, this is likely doing us far more harm than good. Increased knowledge of the leading causes of death in the US, like heart disease and stroke, may lead more people to take precautionary measures that include medication. But it seems that these days, we forget that lifestyle changes can have the exact same impact as medications – in fact, a [2013 study](#) published in *The BMJ* found that exercise was more effective for the treatment of stroke, and equally as effective as medication for prevention of both heart disease and diabetes. So why choose the pill over a healthy lifestyle?

“I think that it is probably easier for patients to pop a pill as opposed to changing their lifestyle, exercising and losing weight,” Dr. Ravi Hira, a cardiology researcher at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, TX, told *Medical News Today*. “These are difficult changes to make.”

Is leading a healthier lifestyle difficult? Sometimes. But what’s far more difficult is the dangerous side effects of over-medicating.

ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE

Unnecessary use of antibiotics, one of the most common prescriptions in the country, is a major cause of drug-resistant bacteria – bacteria that mutates to resist the medication that used to have the ability to kill it off. Over 2 million people become infected with drug-resistant bacteria each year, and over 23,000 die from these infections.

A 2013 study reported by *MNT* revealed the alarmingly high rate of unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions for sore throats, strep, and bronchitis. While the national rates of antibiotic prescriptions should be near 0% for bronchitis and 10% for strep throat, researchers found the respective prescription rates to be 60% and 73%.

“During the last 70 years, bacteria have shown the ability to become resistant to every antibiotic that has been developed. And the more antibiotics are used, the more quickly bacteria develop resistance,” said Dr. Steve Solomon, director of the CDC’s Office of Antimicrobial Resistance.



SIDE EFFECTS



Most of us probably don’t realize that even seemingly innocent OTC medications can have dangerous side effects when use inappropriately or long-term. For example, concerns have been raised about long-term aspirin regimens to prevent heart problems. While aspirin does act as a blood thinner in the body, some studies have suggested that long-term use of aspirin may have negative health implications – despite its reputation for reducing the risk of heart attack and stroke. In January 2013, *MNT* reported that long-term aspirin use can lead to [age-related macular degeneration](#), while other studies have associated aspirin use with hearing loss, gastrointestinal bleeding and bleeding in the brain.

ADDICTION AND OVERDOSE

Opiate painkillers are commonly prescribed in the US, and they have led our country into a devastating epidemic. Opiates are highly addictive, whether a person uses them recreationally or as prescribed, causing excruciating withdrawal symptoms, addiction, overdose, and death. These drugs cause a person to become physically dependent – that means that even if you take painkillers exactly as prescribed, you’ll need to taper off the drug (lower your dosage gradually) before you can stop taking it completely. When used recreationally and in excess, the result of prescription drugs is often fatal. **In 2013, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reported a 300% increase in opiate-related deaths over the past 20 years.**

THE CAUSE & THE SOLUTION

We’re living longer these days, so of course the aging population plays a part in increased use of medications – longer lifespan means more illnesses and more medications. But this is not the sole cause. Some healthcare professionals believe doctors are drastically over-prescribing medications to their patients to save time and make more money.

“We are concerned that many doctors are prescribing medicines unnecessarily because they do not have enough time to sit with their patients and talk about options other than taking medication,” said Celia Grandison-Marly of the UK’s Patients Association.

Another major factor in this public health problem? Pharmaceutical companies and drug advertising. It’s been legal for drug manufacturers to advertise directly to the public since 1985 – advertising professionals in the field claim that this helps inform consumers. But really, what it does is mislead people into taking medications they don’t need. “The truth is direct-to-consumer advertising is used to drive choice rather than inform it,” said Dr. Dee Mangin, associate professor at the Christchurch School of Medicine and Health Sciences in New Zealand. The FDA stated that while direct-to-consumer drug advertising can offer useful information, your healthcare provider is the “best source of information about the right medication for you.”

You can avoid unnecessary medications by staying fully informed about your personal health needs and the potential side effects of any recommended medications. You can also turn to alternative remedies like vitamins, supplements, acupuncture, meditation and more.

Source: [Medical News Today](#)

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