

# More South Africans choose to self medicate than before

A visit to the GP is increasingly becoming the last resort for people suffering from colds and flu this winter, according to a countrywide poll among pharmacists.



(Image: Dvortygirl, via Wikimedia Commons)

The survey, conducted by Pharma Dynamics, one of the largest distributors of colds and flu medication in SA, showed that a staggering 9 out of 10 people now choose to self medicate seasonal ailments such as the flu and allergies with over the counter (OTC) medicines rather than making a doctor their first stop.

Aadila Patel, head pharmacist at Pharma Dynamics, says despite negative connotations generally associated with the idea of self-medication, it is fast becoming the most significant method of self-care for the majority of South Africans.

## Not opting for the doctor

"Over 80% of pharmacists from Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban participating in the poll confirmed a significant drop in patients supplying a doctor's script compared to previous years.

"Confronted with the choice of paying for a doctor's consultation fee or simply walking into a pharmacy and asking for medication they believe would make them better, most are opting for the latter.

"In the past, at the first sign of a cold, people made a turn at the doctor to stop a cold in its tracks, but in recent years we have seen a steady, but growing increase in Pharma Dynamics' OTC colds and flu product sales," says Patel.

She cites high medical aid and general healthcare costs, the ongoing economic slump and a proliferation of access to health information on the internet, among the key contributing factors driving self medication.

## Consumers empowering themselves

"We live in an age where consumers can and do empower themselves with help from the internet. More and more people are diagnosing illnesses online and try to relieve symptoms themselves with OTC or easily accessible alternative medicines. People are starting to take a much more active interest in their health and therefore make it their job to become more informed about ailments of a minor or more severe nature," notes Patel.

The poll also indicated that pharmacists have doubled up on OTC medicines in order to meet anticipated consumer demand, and have even expanded on existing ranges.

Patel says the greatest growth in OTC medicines are from painkillers, cough and cold preparations, antihistamines, throat and nasal sprays, laxatives, low dose aspirin, antithrombotic agents, antacids and dermatologicals.

"There are, however, dangers associated with self-medication that people need to be made aware of," she warns.

"You may have misdiagnosed yourself and be taking medication you don't need and the problem continues, or you may have correctly diagnosed yourself, but are taking the wrong medication. Again, this could lead to a situation where the problem might get worse instead of better.

Patel says the best thing you can do is to know your own body.

"When it comes to colds and flu and you want to self-medicate it's best to see a doctor after about a week if symptoms don't improve. Signs of trouble might be a cough that gets so bad it disrupts sleep, a fever that won't go down, increased shortness of breath and pain in the face because of a severe sinus infection."

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