



Better Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) is a continuous, national survey of general practice activity in Australia in which 1000 GPs per year take part. It commenced in 1998.

Over the counter medications advised by GPs

Australian General Practice Statistics and Classification Centre, University of Sydney

An estimated 10 million over the counter medications recommended by GPs in 2004–2005

The BEACH (Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health) survey form allows GPs to record several aspects of patient management for each problem. Pharmaceutical management is recorded in detail. Other modes of treatment, including clinical treatments (eg counselling) and procedures recorded briefly in the GP's own words, are also related to a single problem. Medication is the most common management activity, either prescribed, GP-supplied, or advised for over the counter (OTC) purchase.

Data on the prescribing patterns of GPs can be accessed from a number of sources, such as BEACH reports or the Pharmaceutical Benefits Schedule (PBS). Over 80% of the 95 000 medications recorded in BEACH between April 2004 and March 2005 were prescribed by the GP and 8% (mostly vaccines) were supplied from surgery stocks¹. There is less information available about the remaining 10% – the OTC medications that GPs have advised their patients to take.

There were 9492 OTC medications recorded in BEACH in 2004–2005, at a rate of 10 per 100 encounters and seven per 100 problems managed. If we extrapolate that to the 95 million A1 and A2 Medicare-claimed encounters in Australia in 2004, GPs recommended almost 10 million medications for OTC purchase that year.

Central nervous system medications predominated, with almost 30% of OTC medications coming from this group. Skin (12% of advised OTC), digestive (10%), musculoskeletal (9%) and respiratory (8%) were the other medication groups commonly advised.

The high rate of central nervous system medications was due mainly to high recorded rates of paracetamol, which accounted for 23% of all OTC medications recorded, being advised at a rate of 2.3 per 100 total encounters. Ibuprofen was the second most commonly advised medication, accounting for 5%. The anti-allergy medications loratadine, fexofenadine and cetirizine were also frequently recorded, as were the topical anti-inflammatory, diclofenac, and the topical antifungal, clotrimazole. Some other commonly recommended medications were topical nasal sodium chloride, the paracetamol/codeine combination, oral rehydration salts, glucosamine and aspirin.

Respiratory problems were the most common group managed with over the counter medications

We matched the OTC medications to the problems for which they were being advised. Respiratory problems were the most common group managed with an OTC medication, accounting for 30% of all problems managed in this way. Half of these problems were upper respiratory tract infections. Unspecified viral illness made up three percent of these problems, while acute pharyngitis accounted for two percent. Other problems commonly managed with an OTC advised medication were gastroenteritis, sinusitis, constipation and tonsillitis. ♦

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1. Britt H, Miller GC, Knox S, Charles J, Pan Y, Henderson J, Bayram C, Valenti L, Ng A, O'Halloran J 2005. General practice activity in Australia 2004–05. AIHW Cat. No. GEP 18. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

