Your questions about complementary medicines answered

Sanne Kreijkamp-Kaspers, Treasure McGuire, Suzanne Bedford, Peter Loadsman, Marie Pirotta, Geraldine Moses, Mieke van Driel

This is the first article in a series providing evidence-based answers to common questions about complementary medicines from consumers and healthcare professionals.

Complementary medicine use in Australia is widespread—estimated two-thirds of Australians use complementary medicines.1 A survey of Australians aged 50 years or older revealed that 46.3% had used complementary medicines in the previous 24 hours.2 Unlike conventional medicines, complementary medicines are available without prescription or medical advice. In the survey, 53% of complementary medicines were bought from pharmacies and about 40% at supermarkets and health food shops, often without any accompanying medical advice.2

Complementary medicines, as defined by the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989 (Amended), include medicinal products containing ingredients such as herbs, vitamins, minerals, nutritional supplements, homeopathic and certain aromatherapy preparations.3 Despite the general public and some health professionals assuming that complementary medicines are ‘natural’ and therefore safe,4 this is not always the case.5–9 Consumers often fail to tell their doctor that they use a complementary medicine.15 Even when general practitioners (GPs) are aware of complementary medicine use, their ability to advise patients about their risks is limited.11 Furthermore, reliable resources are not easily accessible.11 Given their widespread use and the associated potential risks, it is essential that information gaps or concerns regarding complementary medicines are identified and addressed.

Source of the questions
To identify the most commonly asked questions, we analysed 125,919 calls from the NPS MedicineWise (NPS) Medicines Line (1 September 2002–30 June 2010) for consumers and 57,840 calls from the Therapeutic Advice and Information Service (TAIS; 2000–30 June 2010) for community healthcare providers. Both call centres were funded by NPS and operated by Mater Health Services, South Brisbane. Calls about complementary medicines comprised 8.2% of consumer calls (10,288 calls) and 9.3% of healthcare professional calls (5,410 calls).

The median age of consumers enquiring about complementary medicines was 53 years (interquartile range (IQR) 36–67 years); 73% were female. The median age of non-complementary medicine callers was 49 years (IQR 25–65 years) and 68% were female. Of the TAIS enquiries, 47% were from community pharmacists and 37% from GPs. Other callers included nurses (2.4%) and specialists (1.4%).

Selection of the questions
We selected the most frequently mentioned complementary medicines from each call centre. For the selected complementary medicines, two researchers (GP and pharmacist) independently identified the recurring themes for the respective complementary medicines through trend analysis of call narratives.

For each complementary medicine, 3–4 recurring themes were identified. The research team then identified the most relevant questions to be answered, based on their professional experience. This was conducted by three GPs, two pharmacists who staffed the phone lines, and a non-medical researcher. Four questions for each complementary medicine were selected (two from the consumer and two from the health professional call centres). For these questions, an evidence-based answer was developed.

Evidence-based answers
We sourced data from a range of quality information sources, including specialised complementary medicines information resources,10,12 bibliographic databases (EMBASE, Medline), monographs (eg Micromedex, AusDI), Australian Medicines Handbook and
What are the questions about?

Table 1 shows the top 10 ranked complementary medicines for both target audiences. Of note was that the top three complementary medicines, namely glucosamine, St John’s wort and fish oil, were the same in both groups.

In general, consumers were most concerned about safety: 34% asked about possible interactions, compared with 13% in the non-complementary medicines calls, and 12% asked about adverse drug reactions (ADRs), compared with 20% in the non-complementary medicines calls. A similar pattern emerged for healthcare professionals: 42% asked about interactions, compared with 22% of non-complementary medicines calls, and 22% asked about ADRs, compared with 21% of non-complementary medicines calls.

Authors

Sanne Kreijkamp-Kaspers MD, PhD, FRACGP, MSc, Senior Lecturer, Discipline of General Practice, School of Medicine, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD. s.kreijkamp-kaspers@uq.edu.au

Treasure McGuire PhD, BPharm, BSc, GradDipClinHospPharm, GChEd, Associate Professor, Faculty of Health & Medical Sciences, Bond University, Gold Coast; Senior Lecturer, School of Pharmacy, The University of Queensland, Brisbane; Assistant Director (Practice and Development), Mater Pharmacy Services, Mater Health Services, Brisbane, QLD

Suzanne Bedford PhD, BSc, Honorary Research Fellow, Mater Research Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD

Peter Loadsmann BPharm, BSc, Mater Pharmacy Services, Mater Health Services, Brisbane, QLD

Marie Pirotta FRACGP, PhD, NHMRC Career Development Fellow, Department of General Practice, University of Melbourne, Carlton, VIC

Geraldine Moses BPharm, DClinPharm, Senior Clinical Pharmacist, Mater Pharmacy Services, Mater Health Services, Brisbane, QLD

Mieke van Driel MD, MSc, PhD, Fellow, Mater Research Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD

Sanne Kreijkamp-Kaspers MD, PhD, FRACGP, MSc, Senior Lecturer, Discipline of General Practice, School of Medicine, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD

Table 1. Most commonly asked about CMs in the call centre databases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Healthcare professionals’ questions (%)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Consumers’ questions (%)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 5410</td>
<td>n = 10,288</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glucosamine*</td>
<td>620 (11.5%)</td>
<td>1670 (16.2%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St John’s wort*</td>
<td>367 (6.8%)</td>
<td>689 (6.7%)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish oil*</td>
<td>323 (6.0%)</td>
<td>1067 (10.4%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginkgo biloba*</td>
<td>169 (3.1%)</td>
<td>357 (3.5%)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coenzyme Q10</td>
<td>140 (2.6%)</td>
<td>283 (2.8%)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin D</td>
<td>Not in top 10</td>
<td>507 (4.9%)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerian</td>
<td>133 (2.5%)</td>
<td>300 (2.9%)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnesium</td>
<td>124 (2.3%)</td>
<td>Not in top 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black cohosh</td>
<td>113 (2.1%)</td>
<td>Not in top 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium</td>
<td>112 (2.1%)</td>
<td>241 (2.3%)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinc</td>
<td>112 (2.1%)</td>
<td>Not in top 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multivitamins</td>
<td>Not in top 10</td>
<td>586 (5.7%)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Not in top 10</td>
<td>353 (3.4%)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These will be addressed in this series of articles on complementary medicines

References


Correspondence afp@racgp.org.au

Product information. We used language appropriate to the target audience (consumer or health professional). Answers were designed to be succinct but evidence-based.