



衛生署

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Poisoning Watch

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Improper self-medication is NOT good self-care

Introduction

Taking good care of oneself is the best means to stay healthy. Maintaining healthy lifestyle by doing regular exercise, reducing salt and sugar in diet and refraining from alcohol and smoking are examples of good and commendable self-care that keep us healthy. However, self-care should be practised appropriately to yield health benefits. Self-prescription of drugs cannot be considered as an advisable form of self-care because when practised inappropriately, it can cause harm to health.

There is no universally agreed definition of “self-medication”. In the broadest sense, taking vitamin tablets for better health or throat lozenge to soothe a sore throat can be regarded as self-medication. In this article, we are going to confine ourselves to discuss about risky behaviours of self-medication which have been reported as poisoning cases. These are commonly associated with drugs or Chinese medicines with significant potential toxicities. It is always a sensible and prudent move to consult healthcare professionals for your health problems or illnesses, whether drugs are involved or not.

We have reviewed poisoning cases in Hong Kong in the past three years which were associated with self-medication practices to illustrate hazards that may not be immediately obvious as their damages to one's health may only be revealed in the long run. Let's learn from the past and say “NO” to improper self-medication.



衛生防護中心
Centre for Health Protection



Local situation

From 2014 to 2016 (as of 30 September 2016), the Department of Health recorded a total of 486 notifications of poisoning cases. Among them, one-third (33%) were associated with various forms of self-medication (other than poisoning associated with slimming agents)¹. The mean (median) age of these cases was 60 (62) years old and there was no marked gender predilection (52% female).

We categorise these poisoning cases by their sources/special features of self-medication namely i) obtaining oral products over-the-counter or via internet/mobile apps; ii) consuming oral products as recommended and given by peers; iii) consuming Chinese medicines without consulting Chinese medicine practitioners (CMPs).

i. Obtaining oral products over-the-counter or via internet/mobile apps

By far, obtaining oral products over-the-counter or via sales through internet or mobile apps is the most common source of self-prescribed medications associated with poisoning, which accounted for 102 poisoning cases since 2014. Among the 102 cases, the alleged oral products were obtained over-the-counter in Hong Kong (72%), from Mainland China (17%) or overseas (3%) or via sales through internet or mobile apps (8%). Common reasons for taking the oral products included pain relief (55%), upper respiratory tract symptoms (including symptoms of allergic rhinitis) (18%), sleep problem (7%), diabetic control (6%), skin problems (5%), etc. These patients presented with signs and symptoms of poisoning after consumption, often long-term, of the oral products (Figure 1). Majority (77%) of them required hospitalisation.

¹ Self-medication of slimming agents is also an important and common cause of poisoning in Hong Kong but it is not included in this article as the topic has already been discussed in recent issues. Readers may read up past issues from this link http://www.chp.gov.hk/en/guideline1_year/29/134/441/496.html

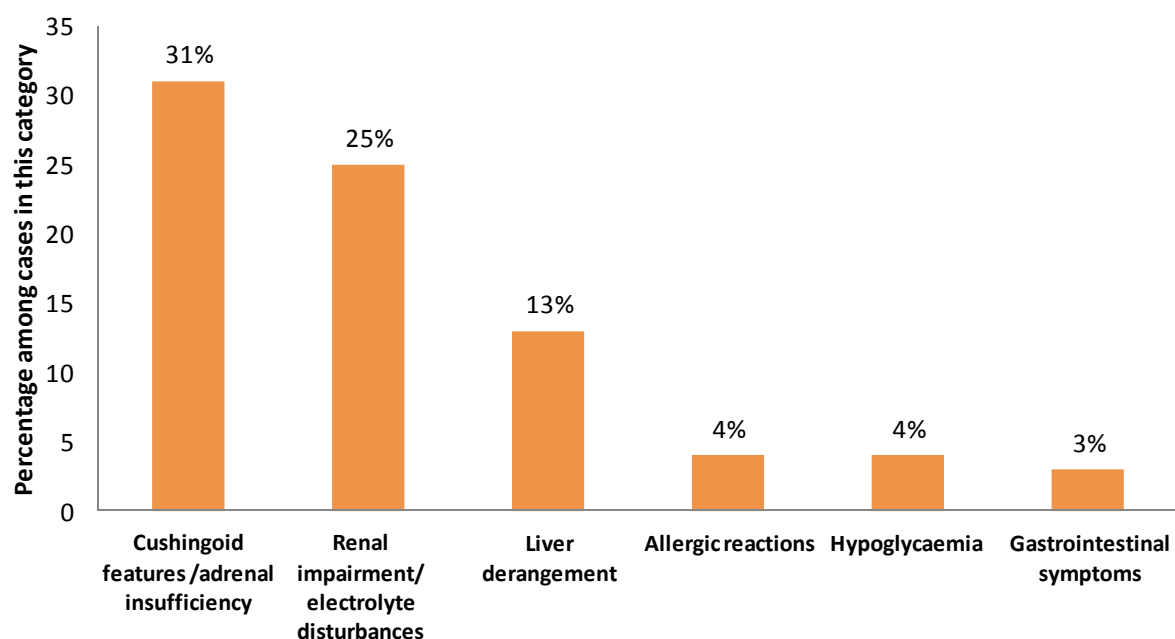


Figure 1: Clinical presentations of poisoning cases who had obtained oral products over-the-counter or via sales through internet/mobile apps, 2014-2016

The incriminated oral products were tested in the laboratory and ingredients with significant potential toxicities were detected. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) (56%) and corticosteroids (51%) were the two most commonly detected drug ingredients (Figure 2). Most patients seemed to be unaware of the composition of the

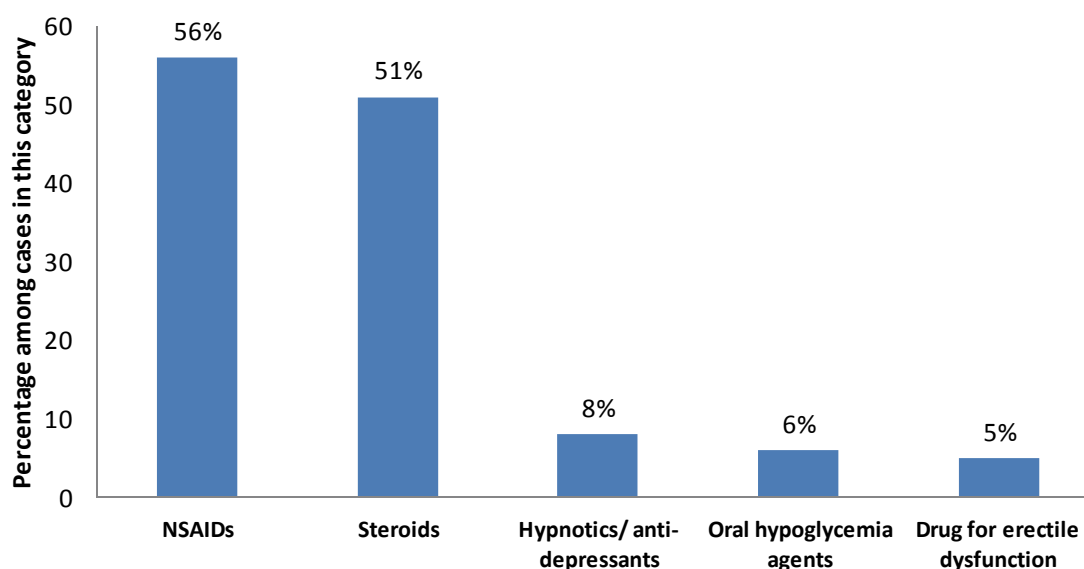


Figure 2: Drug ingredients with significant potential toxicities detected in poisoning cases who had obtained oral products OTC or via sales through internet/mobile apps, 2014-2016



products at the time of consumption for symptom relief. These oral products usually bore no proper label, insert or instruction on dosage and frequency of administration, or different types of pills and capsules were sometimes packed in one single bag (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Different types of pills and capsules were packed in one bag

We noted that patients having chronic medical illnesses e.g. gouty arthritis, allergic rhinitis, were more prone to poisoning of this kind. As toxicities of these oral products accumulated and risk of poisoning increased with length of consumption, the nature of illnesses of these patients, which demanded long-term and persistent treatment for relief, would have added to their vulnerabilities. Fortunately, or unfortunately, these patients usually found the oral products useful in controlling their symptoms, resulting in long-term and persistent use.

While NSAIDs or corticosteroids are effective in some diseases when used properly and under medical supervision, they may give rise to serious side effects e.g. kidney failure, gastrointestinal bleeding, Cushing syndrome, adrenal insufficiency, etc. That is why most NSAIDs and corticosteroids are prescription-only drugs in Hong Kong. It is important that members of the public should consult registered medical professionals for conditions that require supervised use of prescription-only drugs.





ii. Consuming oral products as recommended and given by peers

In the corresponding period, we recorded 34 cases who had consumed oral products that were recommended and given by peers. These made up 21% of poisoning cases associated with self-medication. These oral products were recommended or provided by the patients' relatives or friends in good faith. These patients generally could not provide details about the source of the oral products other than the claimed place of origin. Pain relief (59%) was also the most common reason for taking the oral products. Patients in this category had similar signs and symptoms of poisoning as those in the first category. Similarly, laboratory tests detected NSAIDs and steroids as the most common drug ingredients. The claimed places of origin of these oral products were Mainland China (53%), overseas (21%), Hong Kong (3%), but unknown (including internet sale (2%)) in 23%. As most of these products were not originated from or registered in Hong Kong, great difficulties were encountered in our investigations to track down the source to implement control measures or to prevent recurrence. Without registration in Hong Kong, the safety, quality and efficacy of these unregistered drugs cannot be guaranteed. Some of these oral products may even contain drug ingredients (e.g. phenformin) that are banned in Hong Kong because of their toxicity and potential harm. It is unfortunate that the trust on relatives or friends turned out to be misplaced resulting in lowering of the guard against oral products that were unsafe and harmful to health.

The lesson to be learned is that drug products of dubious origin or unregistered locally should not be used or recommended to others, including your friends or relatives.

iii. Consuming Chinese medicines without consulting CMPs

In this category, the toxicity features, causative substances and more importantly, the actual self-medication practices were distinctly different from the above two categories.





Twenty-three cases were recorded from 2014 to 2016 (as of 30 September 2016), which accounted for 14% of poisoning cases associated with self-medication. Pain relief (43%) and health maintenance (35%) were the two most common reasons for taking the Chinese medicines followed by various motives including relief of symptoms of upper respiratory tract/urinary system/gastrointestinal tract, sleep problems, etc. These patients presented with signs and symptoms of poisoning (Figure 4) after consumption of the Chinese medicines. All of them required hospitalization. Plant alkaloids or their hydrolyzed products were detected in samples of unused herbs, herbal remnants, herbal broth, oral products or patients' urine. Aconitum alkaloids were detected in the majority (78%) of cases.

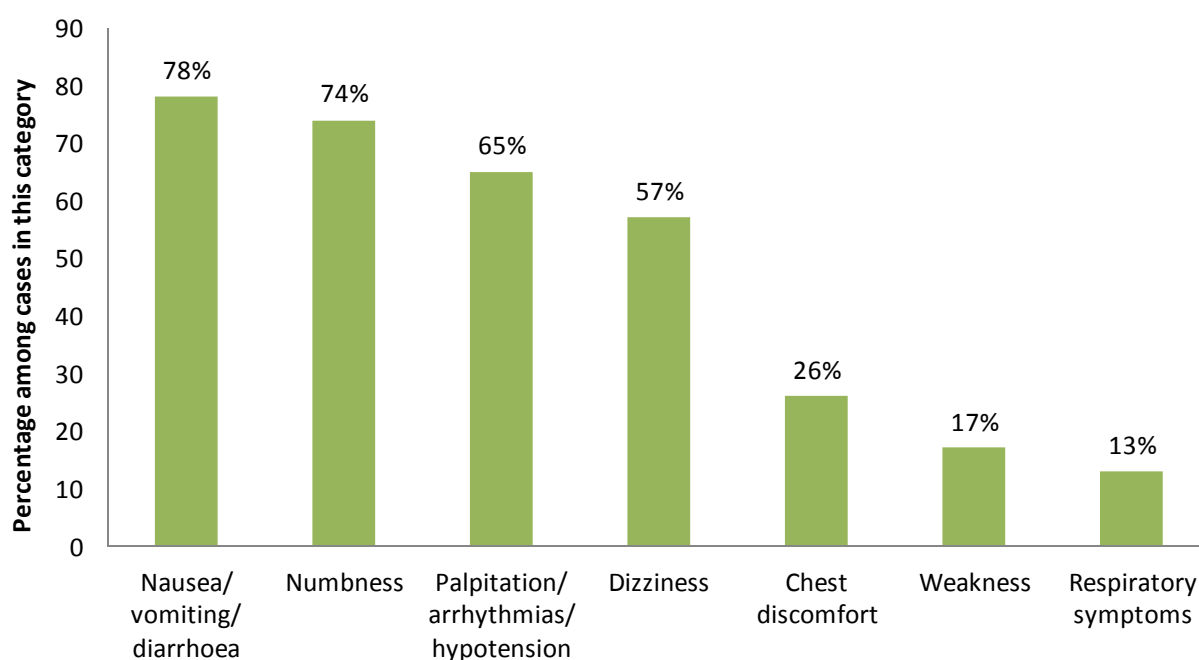


Figure 4: Signs & symptoms of poisoning among poisoning cases who had consumed Chinese medicines without consulting CMPs, 2014-2016

A variety of self-prescribing practices was identified among these cases including the use of herbal formulae from books/magazines/websites (39%), adopting herbal formulae from friends/relatives who were not CMPs (22%), using the same formula prescribed by a CMP repeatedly for repeated ailments without consulting a CMP again (17%), etc. We recorded one patient who consumed *Herba Gelsemii Elegantis* (斷腸草)



which had been picked up from the countryside in Mainland China. The patient developed respiratory failure and confusion and subsequently required admission to intensive care unit.

For proper use of Chinese medicines, general public should base on individual's constitution, clinical symptoms and proper method of decoction and administration under the instruction of a CMP.

Lessons to learn

- ◆ Don't buy, use, recommend or share oral products of unknown or doubtful composition, or from unknown sources.
- ◆ Consult registered healthcare professionals on chronic illnesses for appropriate advice and holistic management and refrain from self-medication, especially on the long term, without professional supervision.
- ◆ Consult a CMP before taking Chinese medicines for treating illness.
- ◆ Don't use the old formula previously prescribed by a CMP repeatedly for repeated ailments without consulting a CMP again.
- ◆ Refrain from picking herbs for consumption from countryside.
- ◆ Seek advice from healthcare professionals if in doubt or feel unwell after consumption of oral products/Chinese medicines.
- ◆ Recognise registered pharmaceutical products or proprietary Chinese medicines by their Hong Kong registration number on the label in the format of "HK-XXXXX" or "HKP-XXXXX/HKC-XXXXX" respectively.
- ◆ Don't buy and use unregistered pharmaceutical products or proprietary Chinese medicines as their safety, quality and efficacy cannot be guaranteed.

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