Push to limit paracetamol as abuse rises

The national medicines regulator will consider restricting the sale of paracetamol after an independent expert report raised concern about overdoses in teenagers. The Therapeutic Goods Administration said in a statement it would begin a consultation process regarding recommendations in the report, which included purchase limits of one or two packs per person and restricting sale without a prescription to over 18s.

YOUTH OVERDOSES

Scrutiny on painkiller sales

Mary Ward
Health reporter

The national medicines regulator will consider restricting the sale of paracetamol after an independent expert report raised concern about overdoses in teenagers. The Therapeutic Goods Administration said in a statement it would begin a consultation process regarding recommendations in the report, which included purchase limits of one or two packs per person and restricting sale without a prescription to over 18s.

Last year, 3575 cases of intentional paracetamol poisoning were reported to the NSW Poisons Information Centre, which handles half of the nation’s poisoning calls. A University of Sydney study found rising rates of poisoning among young people reported to the centre and its Victorian counterpart, with a 98 per cent increase between 2008 and 2016.

Professor Nicholas Buckley, who led that research as well as the independent review, said a 50 per cent increase in incidents had been observed in the five years since. “People haven’t been paying enough attention to what has been happening in adolescent self-poisoning,” said Buckley, who is also a consultant at the NSW Poisons Information Centre.

While hospitalisation and death rates have not increased in recent years, “there is a concerning increase of misuse in the community”, the regulator said.

In their review of available evidence, the panel found paracetamol overdoses, particularly intentional poisonings, were two to three times more common in females than males. They found a “notable” increase in poisonings among teenage girls in 2019 to 2021.

The panel made four recommendations: a reduction in the size of packs sold in supermarkets and convenience stores without a prescription, or in pharmacies without the advice of a pharmacist; a limit of one or two packs per transaction to reduce home stockpiles; making modified-release paracetamol (a stronger dose designed for long-term use) prescription only; and restricting purchase without a prescription to people aged 18 and over.

It also recommended improving communication around the potential harms from paracetamol, maintaining and expanding follow-up care after self-harm and increasing awareness about safer storage and reducing stockpiling of medicines.

Previous University of Sydney analyses of data from the information centre has found overdoses in children are more likely to occur on school days, and the average age of an overdose is decreasing.

Scientia Professor Helen Christensen, a Black Dog Institute board member and a member of the independent panel, said the review confirmed what services had observed for the past decade. “Paracetamol is available in the home, it is accessible, and the evidence suggests that this self-harm is an impulsive act,” she said.
16 SEP, 2022

Push to limit paracetamol as abuse rises

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

The consultation on the recommendations is open until October 14.

Lifeline 13 11 14

Unsafe hands

3575 cases of intentional paracetamol poisoning were reported to the NSW Poisons Information Centre last year.