

Improved vigilance of non-prescription medicine needed to reduce abuse, according to new survey

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A cross-sectional survey has been used to estimate the prevalence of self-reported non-prescription medicine misuse, which has found that almost a fifth of people could have misused medicines in some way over their lifetime. The findings were published today in the *Journal of Public Health*.

The survey was sent to 1000 random adults from the UK Electoral Register, 43.4 per cent of whom responded. They were asked about their [partnership status](#), [general health](#), long-standing illnesses, education, [employment status](#), [alcohol intake](#), and smoking status before being questioned more specifically on their medicine use. This is the first study to estimate the prevalence of non-prescription medicine (NPM) misuse, looking at everything from misuse to [abuse](#) to dependence.

From those who responded, 19.3 per cent reported some misuse over their lifetime. 4.1 per cent reported abuse of an NPM and 2 per cent reported some kind of dependence, whether current or historical. Co-author of the paper, Ms Niamh Fingleton, commented on the type of drugs reported: "The products most commonly misused were painkillers with and without codeine. Codeine-containing painkillers and cough and cold remedies were most likely to be abused. Dependence was reported with painkillers, sleep aids and nicotine products." The paper also reported that being younger, having a long-standing illness requiring regular use of NPMs, and ever having used illicit drugs were predictive

of misuse or abuse. Ms Fingleton, a PhD student funded by the Society for the Study of Addiction, went on to say that:

"Having a long-standing illness is particularly relevant as it reinforces the need for clinicians to be aware of concurrent use of NPMs by their patients, and to be mindful of the potential for misuse, abuse, and dependence."

The survey also highlighted that most people dependent on an NPM had not sought formal help for their dependence. The reasons for this are unknown, and the authors stressed that more research needs to be carried out in future to identify the barriers to seeking treatment for dependence.

More information: 'Non-prescription medicine misuse, abuse and dependence: a cross-sectional survey of the UK general population; *Journal of Public Health*; [DOI: 10.1093/pubmed/fdv204](https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdv204)

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