

# **An upper-class woman with higher education: The profile of the homeopathy user in Spain**

October 3 2018

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A new study identifies the typical pattern of homeopathy consumers in Spain, based on data from the CIS (Centre for Sociological Research) barometer, published last February. The results show that the profile is that of a middle- or upper-class woman of about 46, with higher education and a progressive political ideology.

At the beginning of 2018, homeopathic products lacked a legal license from the Spanish Agency for Medicines and Health Products (AEMPS) for being sold in pharmacies as medicines. However, as of April, the Ministry of Health of the previous Spanish Government regulated the registration of homeopathic products and authorized their commercialization as drugs.

Researchers from the University of Valencia have now identified the profile of the [homeopathy](#) user in Spain after examining the data of 2,486 people extracted from the barometer of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), published last February.

This research, published online in the journal *Atención Primaria*, analyzes the knowledge of alternative therapies, their understanding and use, the degree of satisfaction, the motivation for their use, the centre or place where the user has received the treatment and the main source of information.

The results show that the typical user of homeopathy in Spain is a woman of 46, with a socioeconomic middle- or upper-class position, with higher university studies and with a left-wing ideological position.

"This is not to say that men don't consume homeopathy, but that women are the most frequent users," says Carolina Moreno Castro, a journalism professor at the University of Valencia who heads the Scienceflows research group.

Until the recent study by the CIS, the data available on the knowledge and use of these therapies came from reports elaborated by the industrial sector involved: the study of the Observatory of Natural Therapies, funded by the largest association of professionals of this industry (COFENAT), and the study of Boiron, the main company selling homeopathic products in Spain.

## **Knowledge of homeopathy**

The figures reveal a much lower consumption than previously thought. According to the data collected, 66.5 percent of citizens residing in Spain have heard of homeopathy, although only 5 percent of the total has used it in the 12 months prior to the survey (i.e., 124 out of 2,486).

Consumers justify their decision with two basic arguments: "It is healthy and cures what [conventional medicine](#) cannot." Moreover, respondents say they use it to prevent diseases and to alleviate the side effects of conventional medicine treatments.

Regarding the knowledge of homeopathy, 50.8 percent of the total sample can describe exactly what it consists of. However, 90.2 percent of those who know and understand what it consists of have not used it in the last 12 months.

On the other hand, of the 5 percent of the population that uses it, 46.8 percent do so on an occasional basis. The rest uses it at regular periodic frequencies such as once a week (29.8 percent), once a month (7.3 percent) or less than once a month (14.5 percent). The average level of

satisfaction is 6.9 / 10, lower than that of the same users of the general practitioner (7.9) or the specialist (7.8).

## **Reasons for consuming homeopathy**

The study reveals that the cause mainly defended for its use is, first and second, to help them have a healthy and balanced life (47.5 percent).

Other reasons given are to prevent diseases and ailments (37.1 percent), to cure wherever conventional medicine does not work (32.2 percent), out of belief and trust in therapy (29.1 percent), to relieve the side effects of conventional treatments (17.8 percent) and because conventional medicine is sometimes harmful to one's health (13.7 percent).

Regarding the information channels used by the homeopathy users to learn about these therapies, friends and acquaintances are the main source (70.16 percent). The second most consulted source is the Internet, with 28.2 percent of users, and the third one is professionals (23.4 percent).

"The fact that the Internet is the second most used source makes this situation even more worrisome, since neither of these sources of information are a guarantee of reliability or quality," say the authors.

## **Characteristics of the user**

The typical homeopathy consumers are women (66.1 percent), with an average age of 46, which is significantly lower than that of the general population, which is 50. As for their level of maximum studies reached, 62.9 percent have [higher education](#) or professional training. This difference is significant with respect to the general population, where the

percentage is 38.8 percent in the same categories.

"The fact that they are women with university studies coincides with other published research, both nationally (FECYT) and internationally (such as reports from the United Kingdom)," says Moreno Castro. "The educational and training level is not relevant to make a decision on these products."

Consumers are mostly upper-middle class (32.3 percent) and new middle classes (34.7 percent) and are positioned more towards the ideological left than the general population. 57.3 percent define themselves as Catholic.

When facing a mild pain or a cold, 40 percent confront this by taking drugs, 28 percent do nothing and 23.4 percent try to overcome it with natural products. Finally, the [general population](#) goes to a medical consultation (17.7 percent) more frequently than users of homeopathic products (8.1 percent).

## **Actions to be taken**

For the authors, the fundamental element on which one must work is scientific dissemination by public and health institutions. "The prohibition of the sale of homeopathy within the legal market would not prevent its consumption. Moreover, this could lead to the search for products in an unregulated market," they authors argue.

"It would be interesting for the regulation to allow the sale of these products in supermarkets, for homeopathic products not to be confined to the pharmaceutical area, which also leads to confusion; just as with supplements and vitamin products," concludes Moreno Castro.

**More information:** Lorena Cano-Orón et al. Perfil sociodemográfico

del usuario de la homeopatía en España, *Atención Primaria* (2018). DOI: [10.1016/j.aprim.2018.07.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aprim.2018.07.006)

Provided by Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT)

Citation: An upper-class woman with higher education: The profile of the homeopathy user in Spain (2018, October 3) retrieved 29 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-upper-class-woman-higher-profile-homeopathy.html>

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