

Ontarians stockpiled prescription medications at beginning of pandemic, according to new drug monitoring tool

October 16 2020, by Maria Sarrouh



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In mid-March, Ontarians stockpiled inhalers and there was a 19.2 percent spike in the dispensing of Hydroxychloroquine, a malaria

medication promoted as a possible treatment for COVID-19 that has since proven to be ineffective, according to a new interactive tool launched Thursday by scientists at the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network (ODPRN).

The COVID-19 Ontario Prescription Drug Utilization Tool provides ongoing surveillance of prescription [drug](#) trends that allows policy makers, clinicians and the public to inform their COVID-19 planning decisions with the best evidence possible as the pandemic progresses. As the risks of the pandemic evolve, so will the impact of drug shortages on patients, healthcare professionals and the healthcare system.

The [tool](#) monitors prescription drug utilization trends across the province and reports weekly trends of individuals who were dispensed a prescription drug or received a pharmacy service from 2016 onwards.

"There's a real concern that COVID-19 related drug shortages can negatively impact people's health if they can't get the medication they need," said Dr. Tara Gomes, a scientist at the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute of St. Michael's Hospital and ICES, and a principal investigator of ODPRN. "Being able to monitor these trends, and see how policies as well as clinical practices are changing the way in which the drug supply is being used, can help us avoid drug shortages and adapt more quickly."

Key findings on how the pandemic has impacted drug supply and the way medications are dispensed can be seen in the data presented by the tool. One [trend](#) that is evident is the stockpiling of inhalers.

"During a pandemic that has respiratory implications, there was clearly a concern among people with respiratory problems that they might not be able to access their inhalers," said Dr. Gomes. "Although there was a shortage of some inhalers during the pandemic, a rapid policy response helped source new products to avoid a gap in access for Ontarians. It is

hoped that this tool can continue to help [policy-makers](#) react quickly to disruptions in medication access for patients across the province."

The tool also shows a 21 percent increase in demand for flu shots over the previous year. This trend will be important to monitor over the coming winter months as demand for the flu shot has been high and broad access is needed to reduce the burden of influenza on hospitals.

Additionally, more frequent dispensing of chronic medications—like drugs used to treat [high blood pressure](#) and diabetes—is seen in the data, a trend that was expected by the scientists at ODPRN. The trend was symptomatic of policies limiting the size of prescriptions implemented by the Ministry of Health to mitigate the risk on the drug supply during a pandemic, and has reversed since restrictions have eased.

"There is evidence to suggest that all the news that comes out about potential treatments and how to deal with COVID-19 impacts the way people use medication," said Dr. Mina Tadrous, a scientist at Women's College Hospital and ICES, and an investigator with the ODPRN. "Even in Canada, we saw a spike in people trying to get Hydroxychloroquine around the time all the tweets and news came out in March. So, we're not protected from misinformation here."

The information included in the tool was captured using the Ontario Drug Benefit database, which contains records of dispensed drugs and pharmacy services that are reimbursed through Ontario's publicly-funded drug program. It also uses data from the Ontario Narcotics Monitoring System, which contains all prescriptions for controlled, and monitored substances dispensed from all community pharmacies in Ontario. As new data emerges, the tool will be updated and expanded to include any new drugs and illustrate trends. The findings are intended to provide an early indication of how trends are continuously changing to facilitate rapid policy and clinical responses.

"I think we saw first-hand how dynamic this is," said Dr. Tadrus.
"Unfortunately, for a lot of sectors, COVID-19 showed the cracks in the system. Misinformation, stockpiling and drug shortages were all problems we had before this. During this pandemic, it just became more obvious."

More information: odprn.ca/COVID19-ontario-prescription-utilization-tool/

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

Citation: Ontarians stockpiled prescription medications at beginning of pandemic, according to new drug monitoring tool (2020, October 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-10-ontarians-stockpiled-prescription-medications-pandemic.html>

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