

Survey examines Americans' use of and satisfaction with homeopathic medicines

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A new survey finds that homeopathic medicines are primarily used by a small segment of the U.S. population for common, self-limited conditions such as the common cold or back pain. The report published in the *American Journal of Public Health* also finds that homeopathy users, particularly those who also report visiting homeopathic practitioners, find the use of these products helpful and that they tend to use a greater variety of complementary and integrative medicine (CIM) modalities than do users of supplements and other CIMs. This is the first detailed report on the use of homeopathy in this country.

"The information provided by this survey is important to regulatory officials at the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) and the FTC (Federal Trade Commission), both of which have inquired about the public use and perception of these products," says Michelle Dossett, MD, PhD, MPH, of the Benson-Henry Institute at Massachusetts General Hospital, lead and corresponding author of the paper. "Since most people purchase these products over the counter without physician guidance, it is reassuring to see that most use them for non-serious, self-limited conditions."

Homeopathy is a 200-year-old system of medicine based on the principal of similars - that highly diluted substances can be used to treat symptoms similar to those that would be caused by large doses of those substances in healthy people. While it is controversial because of the extremely diluted nature of homeopathic medications, interest in homeopathy has increased in recent years. Although homeopathic medicines are usually stocked near supplements on drug store shelves, the authors note they are regulated differently from supplements, going through formal approval by the Homeopathic Pharmacopoeia Convention of the United States and conforming with FDA guidelines for [good manufacturing practices](#).

The study analyzed data from the National Health

Interview Survey, which is conducted annually by National Center for Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The 2012 survey included a number of questions about participants' use of CIM and was completed by more than 34,500 adults. The study authors - based at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, where Dossett was a research fellow at the time of the survey - divided respondents into four groups: those who used homeopathic products during the preceding 12 months, those who used supplements but did not use homeopathy, those who used other forms of CIM but not homeopathy or supplements, and those who did not use CIM.

The respondents who reported using homeopathy were more likely to be white, female, married, highly educated, aged 30 to 44 and live in the western U.S. than were CIM users who did not use homeopathy. They also were more likely to report using other types of CIM, except for chiropractic or osteopathic manipulation, and to have used several different types of CIM.

While two-thirds of the 718 respondents who used homeopathy ranked it among their top three CIM therapies, only 140 or 19 percent reported seeing a homeopathic practitioner during the preceding year. One third of homeopathy users - both those who did and did not consult practitioners - reported using homeopathy to address specific health conditions, most commonly head and chest colds. Those who did see a practitioner were significantly more likely to report that homeopathy was very important to maintaining their health and that it had helped their health problem 'a great deal.'

"We were a bit surprised to see how few homeopathy users reported seeing a practitioner, but I don't think that is concerning since most use is for conditions that will resolve on their own and homeopathic medicines are generally very safe," says Dossett, who is an instructor in Medicine at Harvard Medical School. "Our data suggest that the

likelihood of people using these products for serious conditions without input from a healthcare professional is low, and data from other groups suggest that most CIM use is in addition to, not in place of, conventional treatment."

While she agrees that the data from this report helps meet the interest of the FDA and FTC for information on the use of homeopathy, Dossett adds that additional, more detailed information on [homeopathy](#) users and studies of homeopathic products would provide additional helpful information.

More information: *American Journal of Public Health*, [dx.doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.303025](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.303025)

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