

Over The Counter Codeine Use By People Who Inject Drugs Regularly In Australia



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Introduction

In Australia traditionally low-dose codeine tablets have been readily available in pharmacies ('over the counter', OTC). Recent changes have seen higher restrictions placed on OTC codeine sales. This has resulted in higher pharmacist involvement in sale of OTC codeine pain relief products as well as reduced pack sizes to a maximum of five day supply.

OTC codeine is mainly used for the relief of mild to moderate pain. OTC codeine medications vary in codeine quantity and are only available in combinations (usually with analgesics or decongestants). There are associated health concerns with the prolonged use of codeine- most notably the risk of liver damage.



There are also health risks associated with chronic ingestion of combination drugs such as ibuprofen. Recent data has shown cases of serious harm in users of codeine/ibuprofen combination drugs. Complications seen included gastrointestinal disease, renal failure, anaemia and low blood potassium (Frei, Nielsen, Tobin, & Dobbin, 2010). These harms are typical of those associated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen. In 2009, Nurofen Plus® (codeine/ibuprofen) and Panadeine® (codeine/paracetamol) were reported by participants in the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) as the most commonly used brands of OTC codeine. In 2010 data has been collected to further investigate the use of OTC codeine amongst this sample.

Aim

- ❖ To investigate trends in the use of OTC codeine amongst a sample of PWID regularly
- ❖ To investigate the pain and non-pain reasons for using OTC codeine amongst a sample of PWID regularly

Method

The IDRS has collected directly comparable data in each Australian jurisdiction since the year 2000, allowing shifts in drug trends to be placed in a rich and detailed background context. The IDRS is a strategic surveillance system that has been monitoring use, price, purity and availability of illicit drugs

In June 2010 face to face interviews were conducted with 902 people who inject drugs regularly (PWID). Participants were asked questions investigating extra-medical use of OTC codeine (use for non-pain reasons), acute and chronic pain and pain management, frequency of use, main brands used, the reason for use, and the amount of tablets/capsules used per dose. This data was analysed using PASW Statistics 18.

This project is coordinated nationally by national Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) in New South Wales.

Results

Use of OTC codeine

In 2010, fifty-two percent of PWID reported having ever used OTC codeine. Thirty five percent reported using OTC codeine in the last six months. The median number of tablets/capsules taken at one time was three, range 1-250. The median dosage the last time they took OTC codeine was 26mg of codeine. One participant reported using more than 100 tablets in a session. Fifty-two percent of users took more than the recommended dose (2 tablets) last time they took OTC codeine.

Table 1: Lifetime and recent use of OTC codeine

IDRS 2010	n=902
% Ever used OTC codeine	52
% Recently used OTC codeine*	35
% Recently used OTC codeine for non-pain reasons*	10
% Ever injected OTC codeine	4
% Recently injected OTC codeine*	<1

* In the past 6 months

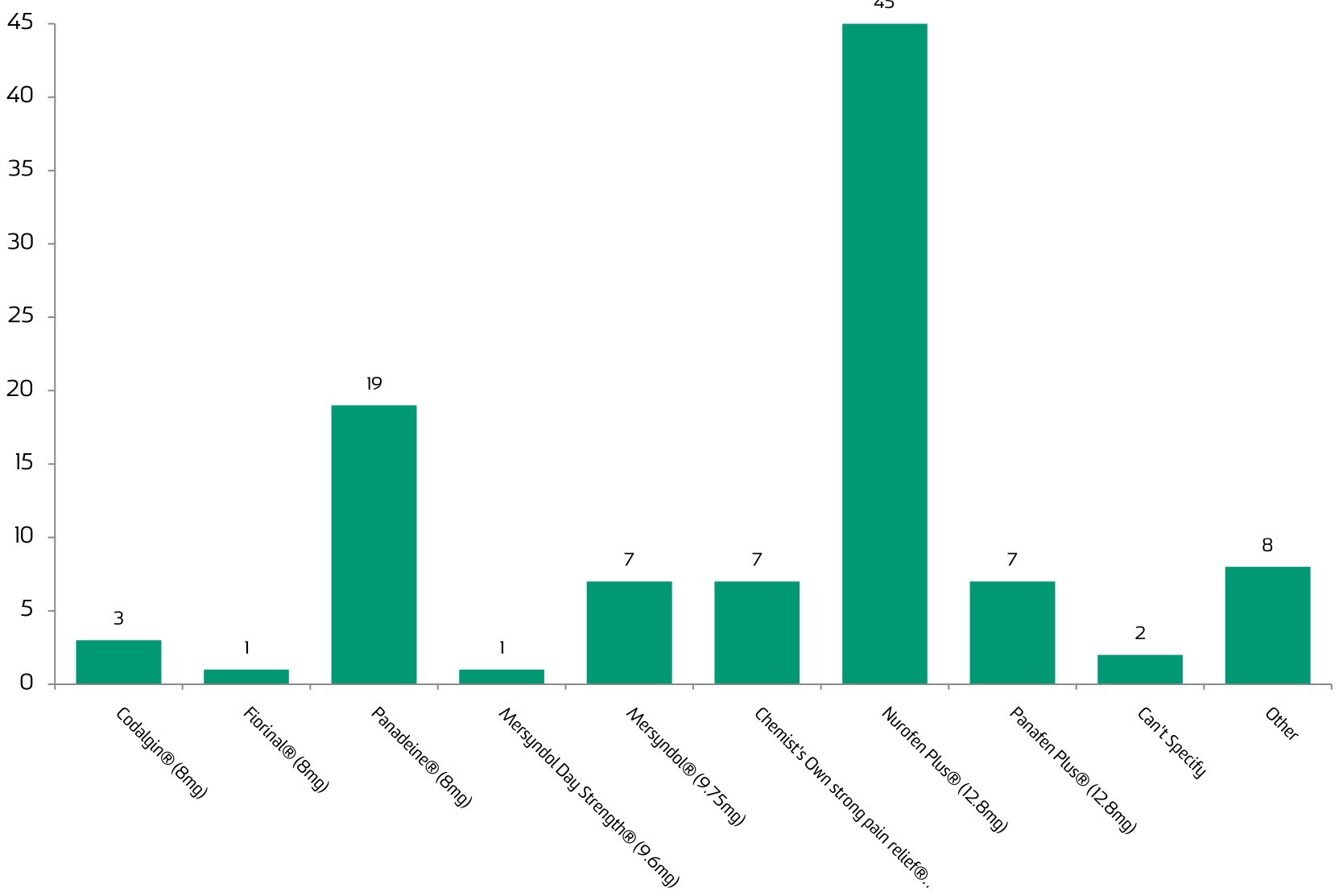
OTC codeine and other drugs

The majority of all PWID and those PWID who had recently used OTC codeine reported that heroin was their drug of choice. There were no significant differences in the drug of choice reported between the two groups.

Brand of OTC codeine

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 52% had used a brand which administered the codeine in combination with ibuprofen. Codeine in combination with paracetamol was administered by 36% of the respondents. The most commonly used brand was Nurofen Plus® (45%).

Figure 1: Proportion of PWID who had recently used OTC codeine brand (by dosage)



OTC codeine and pain

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 137 had experienced pain in the last four weeks, one third (33%) of users reported the pain to be moderate. The majority (59%) also reported the pain to be acute/short-term pain.

Table 2: Severity and type of pain experienced in the last 4 weeks by OTC codeine users

IDRS 2010	
Severity of pain	n=137
% Reported pain as very mild	11
% Reported pain as mild	20
% Reported pain as moderate	33
% Reported pain as severe	28
% Reported pain as very severe	9
Type of pain	n=137
% Acute/short-term pain	59
% Chronic malignant pain	8
% Chronic non-malignant pain	34

OTC codeine and non-pain – extra-medical use

Of the 304 PWID who had used OTC codeine in the last six months, 64 reported using for non-pain reasons. The most common non-pain reasons for codeine use were to go to sleep and to substitute for heroin or illicit opioids.

Table 3: Proportions of OTC codeine users who used OTC codeine for non-pain reasons

IDRS 2010	n=55
% To get high/feel a buzz	24
% To feel numb	13
% To go to sleep	35
% To substitute for heroin or illicit opioids	37
% To substitute for my pharmacotherapy dose	13
% To supplement my pharmacotherapy dose	2
% Other	22

Of those reporting the use of OTC codeine for non-pain reasons the median number of tablets/capsules taken in the session where they had the most tablets at once was six, range 1-80. The median dosage in the session when they took the most tablets at once was 51mg of codeine. No participants reported using more than 100 tablets in their session of maximum use. Of users who took OTC codeine for non-pain reasons 71% took more than the recommended dose (2 tablets) the time in the last 6 months that they took the most OTC codeine.

The median number of days used in the past six months was 8. Three users (5%) reported using codeine daily.

Conclusion

- ❖ OTC codeine was most commonly used to relieve pain.
- ❖ OTC codeine was also used for non-pain reasons. The most common reason was to substitute for heroin or illicit opioids.
- ❖ The median number of tablets used in a session by both all users of OTC codeine (3 tablets) and users of OTC codeine for non-pain reasons (6 tablets), was above the recommended dose (2 tablets).
- ❖ Nurofen Plus®, a codeine/ibuprofen combination drug, was the most commonly used brand of OTC codeine in 2010.
- ❖ The high number of OTC codeine users taking above the recommended dose of codeine combination drugs (paracetamol and ibuprofen) indicates this group could be at risk of adverse events associated with these medications.

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