

Targeting Pain in Pharmacy

Irish Pharmacy News spoke to Susan Meaney, OTC Team Lead with Murphy's Pharmacy about the pain relief market and where the sector lies within the OTC medicines landscape.



Susan Meaney, OTC Team Lead,
Murphy's Pharmacy

The management of pain places a huge burden on health resources, with the number of patients seeking help for chronic pain increasing due to Ireland's ageing population.

Over the counter (OTC) analgesics containing codeine or dihydrocodeine in combination with other analgesics, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, are intended for short-term use (no longer than three days) to minimise dependence and addiction. Concerns that codeine or dihydrocodeine containing analgesics are being taken regularly should be discussed with the patient and the patient should be encouraged to seek medical advice and access appropriate services.

The biggest problem areas are the lower back, knee, back, shoulder and hip. But it can also involve living with pain in the foot, abdomen, head or ankle.

Types of Pain

Acute or short-term pain usually has a sudden onset and a clearly identifiable cause, such as sustaining a burn while cooking, and lasts no longer than a few days.

While unpleasant, it often serves a useful purpose in triggering reparative action, eg taking a baking tray out of the oven with bare hands causes pain that results in the individual dropping the tray, thereby minimising further damage. Addressing the cause usually resolves the problem, eg taking heat out of the burned area by applying a towel soaked in cold water.

- Recurrent or intermittent pain is acute pain that comes and goes, for example, toothache. Again, addressing the issue usually eases the pain, though the exact cause may be difficult to pinpoint and some conditions – period pain, for instance – require regular management, though usually not for long on each occurrence.
- Chronic pain differs from recurrent pain in that it is unrelenting, though there will be times when it feels more severe than others, and it lasts three months or longer. The cause is usually a long-term condition such as arthritis, though it may be less specific, for example a painful back.

Chronic pain can have a huge effect on quality of life, causing problems with mobility, dexterity, sleep and concentration. It often results in the sufferer changing how they live in order to cope. This, in turn, can have a huge bearing on emotional wellbeing, causing anxiety, helplessness and depression.

Susan says there has been a noticeable difference and a higher incidence of people searching for analgesics or pain relief within the pharmacy.

Stockpiling Issues

"A lot of this started at the beginning of the pandemic as people were advised to take pain relief in the form of paracetamol to relieve the symptoms of Covid-19, in particular to reduce fever associated with the virus. This, coupled with the anxiety people felt at the time, led to massive panic or bulk buying," she comments.

"People began stockpiling a variety of products for pain and temperature relief, not only for themselves as adults but also for their children. This led to mainstream items like Calpol Suspension for children becoming very difficult for us to get supply of here in the pharmacy as there was shortages of this product.

"When word of this got out to the public domain, this in turn led to further attempts to bulk buy this, or similar products. In summary, absolutely our sales of pain relief products have sky rocketed in the last 12 months.

"Now, as the Covid vaccines have come on stream, we have seen patients coming into the pharmacy prior to vaccination to buy paracetamol or ibuprofen as they have been advised by their GP to take these to reduce any fever that may occur post vaccination."

As with any OTC category, this market has its own challenges for pharmacy teams when it comes to management and treatment options.

"Educate customers! We are the most accessible part of the healthcare system in Ireland, therefore people come into us first before going to see their GP, and so we can have a huge influence on how those patients manage and treat their pain"

Susan continues, "Initially, at the start of the pandemic it was very difficult to get stock of paracetamol as sales went through the roof. We couldn't keep it on the shelf as people were buying it up so quickly. Furthermore, there were no sales representatives on the road for most of the past year as they were working from home.

"Often, people come in to the pharmacy and already have made up their minds what they want. It can be a challenge to get them to be open to our advice on pain relief products.

"Moreover, many frequently come in to us and ask "can I have the strongest pain killer you have." It certainly can be a challenge getting them to try a milder alternative first and see if that helps them before stepping up



to a stronger product, as really they just want the “quick fix.” It takes time & effort, and patience to explain the analgesic ladder to them and help them understand how to manage their pain.

Opportunities in the Market

“Many people come in looking for codeine based products and this is where our team refer them one of our pharmacists to handle the sale of these products. This can also be challenging when you have repeat customers coming in looking for codeine based products.”

However with challenge, comes opportunity.

“There is a huge opportunity to educate patients on analgesic ladder and advise them to try paracetamol first line before reaching for the strongest painkillers first, and educating them on the proper use of pain relief,” Susan adds.

“Educate customers! We are the most accessible part of the healthcare system in Ireland, therefore people come into us first before going to see their GP, and so we can have a huge influence

on how those patients manage and treat their pain.

“The more we educate our pharmacy OTC team on new products the better care we can provide to our customers.

“This category can be a minefield with lots of different brands of the same product, lots of variations of similar products, people often get very confused on what the difference is between them.”

Susan goes on to explain the value of this sector to her pharmacy. “The pain relief sector is of very high value to our pharmacy. It accounts for a very high portion of your OTC sales all year round. Often customers come in for one thing, perhaps a prescription, and while they are waiting or at the till, they spot our pain relief products in clear view and will often add them to their purchase as “they are handy to have”.

“Pain relief products are all located together in a very central position behind our counter, and are always kept at eye-level, therefore as the customer approaches the till they are clearly

within the line of view. The is very important as it further drives the impromptu sales.

“Signage is also very important here. We have a whole bay dedicated to pain relief products and this is clearly marked by a big sign labelled “Pain Relief” for people to see.”

Susan’s Key Tips

- All Pain relief products are to be kept together.
- All brands are kept together - increases visual impact.
- Keep best sellers at eye level.
- Keep the area well stocked so you have plenty products on view.
- We have some shelf markers too that may draw attention to a particular brand or product.
- New products - we might keep them on a promotional stand for a couple of weeks alongside the till to further draw the customers attention to the new product.

Susan ensures her pharmacy team are consistently kept up to date with the latest guidance.

“All our staff will be sent on the IPU counter assistant training course,” she adds.

“This means they are well educated in OTC pharmacy ailments and products used to treat them. We also continuously do in-house training with our staff, this is done by our Training & Development officer Mary Waters.

“This continued professional development further compounds their education in the area and team members often discuss topics or problems patients have presented with & learn on the job from how another staff member may have dealt with a particular problem. Younger staff gain a considerable amount of knowledge listening and observing our experienced OTC staff dealing with customers in real time at the till, this is invaluable experience for them hands on.

“Pharmacy representatives are also a valuable source of knowledge to our staff, especially of new products to the market, or new variations of existing products,” she concludes.

