A Closer Look at the Digestive Market

In addition to allowing nutrients and vitamins to reach your body, the digestive system also helps remove waste from your body. However, People may experience discomfort when something goes wrong with their digestive system. In fact, four out of every ten adults in the world experience digestive problems at any one time.

Written by Stephen Cuffe, Pharmacist, Inish Pharmacy, Carndonagh Shopping Centre, Carndonagh

- Bloating & Gas 263% increase
- Cramping & IBS 256% increase.

The period shown in 2021 was during level 5 restrictions. With these restrictions, people were required to stay at home except for travel for work (only if essential), education, or other essential purposes. With a lot of people having to work from home and home-school and non-essential services closed it may have been a stressful period. In addition to causing you to lose your appetite and slow down your digestion, stress can also provoke issues such as constipation, diarrhoea, indigestion, or upset stomachs. This may explain part of the increase.

Other factors which may have skewed the figures are product availability (shortages), limited access to GPs. No doubt most customers would have traditionally gone to their local pharmacist rather than purchasing on-line in the past. So there is no surprise that on-line sales increased in trend with a general shift to online shopping during the pandemic.

Increased Demand

So what's your take away from our figures? Well I'd suggest that as the pandemic is not over then there is likely to still be an increased demand for products in this category. People are still experiencing changes to lifestyle and work and increased levels of stress. Access to GPs is still limited. As such, it is certainly an area that we as community pharmacists can help with. With restrictions easing and footfall in shopping areas returning we anticipate the on-line demand to reduce and a return to in-store demand.

Within our pharmacies, we do not actively advertise specific brands. However, I would advise that you make your customers more aware that you have products available that could help their symptoms. Make these categories more visible by choosing noticeable shelf locations and category specific marketing.

Many digestive complaints such as constipation, diarrhoea, heartburn, bloating, and irritable bowel syndrome can be alleviated with lifestyle changes. Eliminating high sugar, fat, refined carbohydrates, and low fibre typical in many of our diets should be considered first. However, given many of our cravings for such foods, and the ever increasing fast-food options that tempt us, it is unlikely that there will be any mass population changes in eating habits overnight. As such, community pharmacists can help patients with effective products that alleviate while also educating them. Referral to a doctor will be recommended if something more serious is suspected.

Drop in Footfall

Despite remaining open during the pandemic, our pharmacies experienced a considerable drop off in footfall. However, in addition to prescription medications, one over the counter category that was notable was the digestive ailment category. The demand and sales of products in this sector increased throughout the pandemic. However, as people stayed at home much more, there was a definite shift in sales to on-line and we noticed this with our own on-line channel.

To show the increase in online sales in this sector I am sharing a comparison on sales from January and February 2020 with sales from January and February 2021. I have broken this sector down into six sections – constipation, haemorrhoids and piles, acid indigestion and reflux, diarrhoea, bloating and gas and cramping, and IBS. Each section saw a substantial increase with the largest increase in the acid indigestion & reflux section, which rose by 609%. All the increases are as follows:

- Constipation 239.5% increase
- Haemorrhoids & Piles 334% increase
- Acid Indigestion & Reflux 609% increase
- Diarrhoea 169% increase