



# No evidence on short-term cough medicines

A has found that there is no substantial evidence that over-the-counter medicines are effective in treating short-term coughs in children and adults. The research which was carried out by the Health Research Board (HRB) Centre for Primary Care Research, Department of General Practice, RCSI has been published in The Cochrane Library.

A short term (acute) cough is a common and troublesome symptom in children and adults suffering from upper respiratory tract infection (URTI) caused by a cold. Many people self-prescribe over-the-counter (OTC) cough preparations, and health practitioners often recommend their use for the initial treatment of cough.

Data from 29 trials involving 4835 adults and children with acute coughs was examined to determine the effectiveness of various types of over-the-counter (OTC) medications used at different dosages when compared with a placebo. The majority of the trials of adult medications, (which compared antitussives, the expectorant guaifenesin, antihistamines and antihistamine-decongestant combinations with placebo) showed either no benefit or variable results. The majority of the child studies (which included antitussives, antihistamines, antihistamine-decongestants and antitussive/bronchodilator combinations) found that the medications were no more effective than placebo.

A limited number of trials showed benefits including a trial in both children and adults which favoured active treatment with mucolytics over placebo and a trial in children indicated that natural honey was more effective than placebo over a three-day period.

The research found no solid evidence for or against the effectiveness of OTC medications in acute cough. Furthermore, 19 studies reported infrequent

adverse effects of these medications which were mainly minor side effects such as nausea, vomiting, headache and drowsiness.

Lead author on the study Professor Susan Smith, Associate Professor, HRB Centre for Primary Care Research in the RCSI Department of General Practice said: "There is a high prevalence of coughs and colds at this time of year and patients often buy over the counter medications to alleviate their symptoms. However, our study has found little evidence to support expenditure on these over the counter medications for coughs and some of these medicines can occasionally result in adverse side-effects. Simple remedies such as honey and lemon can provide effective relief for coughs at a lower cost than over-the-counter medicines. However, parents should note

that honey should not be given to children under the age of one. We recommend that patients talk to their pharmacist or GP for advice on low-cost safe treatments for coughs that can be prepared at home."

Professor Smith's co-authors on the study are Dr Knut Schroeder

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