



FROM THE COLLEGE NURSE

An excerpt from Medscape Medical News

Adolescents, Young Adults Lack Knowledge of Acetaminophen's (Paracetamol) Toxicity

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May 7, 2010 (Vancouver, British Columbia) — A study of more than 250 teenagers and young adults by researchers at the University of Rochester, in New York, has found that more than 60% do not know what acetaminophen is, even though a third are users of acetaminophen-containing over-the-counter (OTC) pain-relieving products. Nearly 25% misuse the medications, researchers announced here at the Pediatric Academic Societies 2010 Annual Meeting.

"Acetaminophen toxicity is a big deal, but we know a lot more [about its effects] in adults than we do in adolescents. The adolescent age group is what is new about this work," said study presenter Laura Shone, DrPH, MSW, associate professor of pediatrics and clinical nursing, Department of Pediatrics, University of Rochester Medical Center, in an interview with *Medscape Pediatrics*.

The problem is huge, Dr. Shone said. Published studies have documented that overdoses of acetaminophen are the cause of more acute liver failure in the United States than viral hepatitis. Furthermore, one half to two thirds of these overdoses are unintentional and result from taking excessive doses of OTC medication.

At the heart of this problem is a lack of awareness about medications being consumed (health literacy). Health literacy is ... "the ability to find, understand, and use health information to communicate and make health decisions and function successfully as a patient."

The situation for adolescents is far less clear, particularly concerning the understanding of OTC medications and label instructions for their use, explained Dr. Shone.

"Health literacy in regard to OTC meds is truly lacking in the adolescent age group, because the medication managers prior to these years were the adults in the home. Now, there is capability and access without knowledge, in combination with teenage behavior and thoughts — a combination of [the attitude that] nothing is going to hurt me, impulsive thinking, and risk-taking behaviors — that are all in play," Germaine Defendi, MD, associate clinical professor, Department of Paediatrics, Olive View/UCLA Medical Center, Los Angeles, told *Medscape Pediatrics*.

Read the [entire article](http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/721420) at <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/721420>

Some questions for consideration:

- What is the status of Australian adolescents' health literacy?
- Where do they gain health literacy? How much comes from school, parents, GPs, TV advertising, Government Health Campaigns or peers?
- Does easy access to paracetamol as a 'quick fix' lessen healthy lifestyle choices? Is this true of our society, not only adolescents?
- Does the ease and frequency with which adolescents reach for paracetamol tablets desensitize them to illicit drugs, particularly ecstasy?