

LAY SUMMARY OF A RESEARCH STUDY CONDUCTED IN THE SCHOOL

How patients use different sources of information about medicine side effects

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Why we did this study

Medicines can all cause side effects. How common and how severe side effects are is an important factor used by regulatory authorities to decide whether or not a medicine should be available without a prescription. All medicines in the UK, whether you buy them from any retail outlet, a pharmacy or get them on prescription must, by law, include a Patient Information Leaflet (PIL). Doctors, nurses and pharmacists may also give you information about medicines when they prescribe or dispense them.

But you can also get information about a medicine from websites, or other people you know, and newspapers, magazines and television programmes often have articles about medicines.

Not much research has been done on which of these many sources of information about medicines patients use to help them identify potential side effects.

What we wanted to find out

We wanted to find out what patients think of and how they use different sources of information about side effects from medicines.

What we did

We developed a questionnaire which included questions to find out about:

- patients' likely use of information sources about medicine side effects
- what they thought about how easy these sources were to access and understand and how trustworthy they were
- what information sources they used when they experienced a suspected side effect
- how confident they were that the experience was a side effect from a medicine.

Who we asked

We gave out the questionnaire to 894 customers of pharmacies in Kent and Birmingham, who had used prescription or non-prescribed medicines in the past six months and were aged 18 or over.

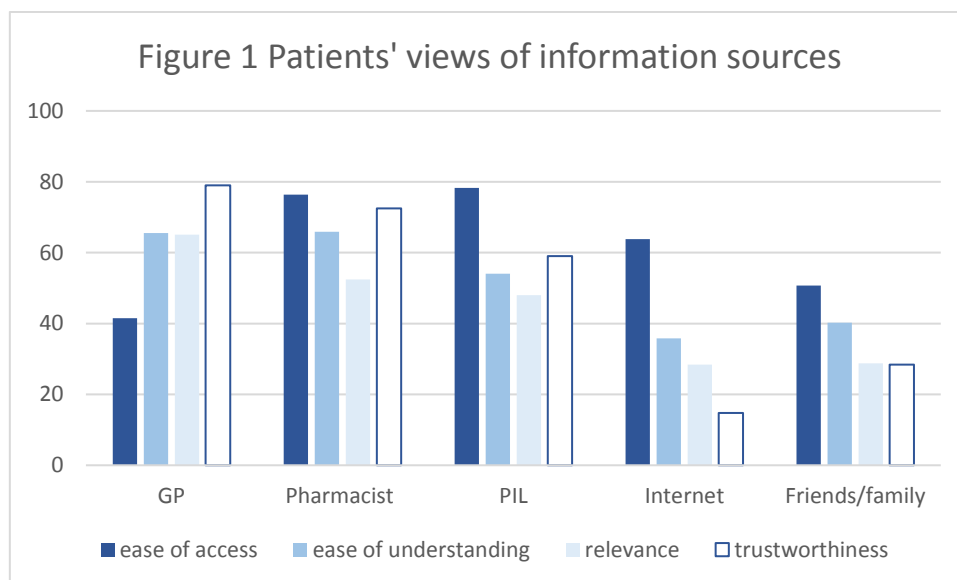
The total number of questionnaires returned was 230. Over half were from women – 141 (61.3%).

73 (32.0%) were aged below 50, 99 (43.4%) 51 to 70 and 56 (24.6%) above 70 years.

Most (193; 84.6%) used at least one medicine regularly.

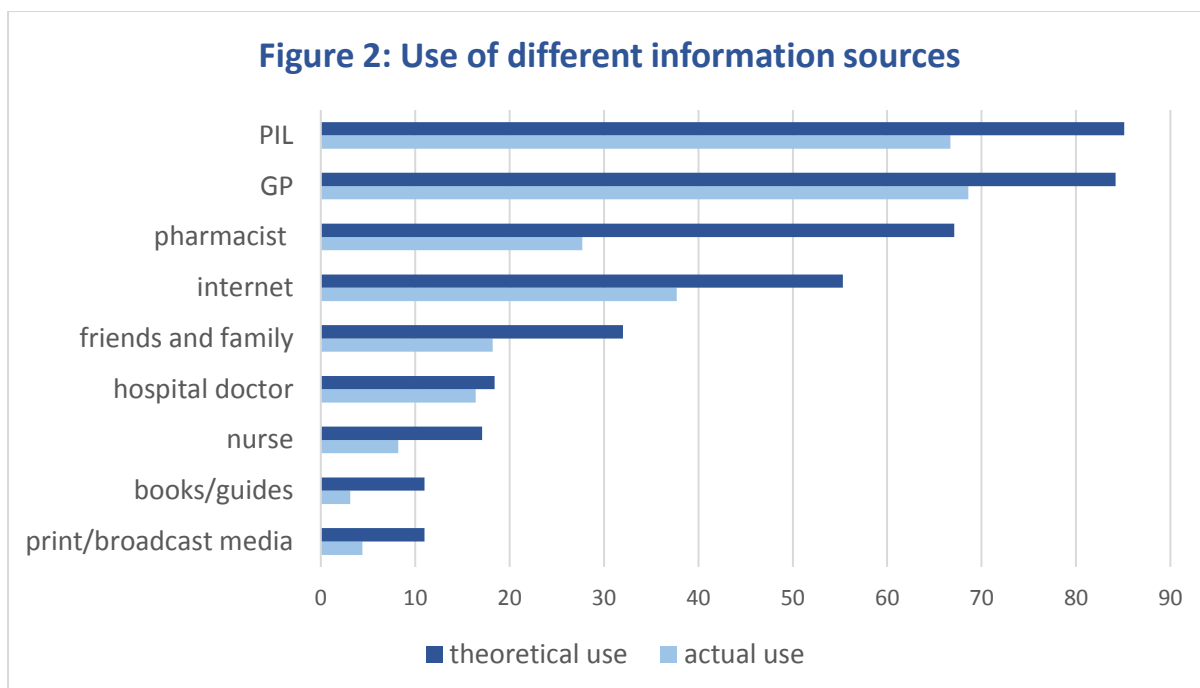
What we found out

- The most popular information sources patients said they would use to find out about a side effect were: patient information leaflets (85%), GPs (84%) and pharmacists (67%)
- Over half (55%) said they would use the internet, 32% relatives/friends and 11% media sources
- Patient information leaflets were thought to be easy to access by 78%, but only 59% thought they were trustworthy and only 54% thought they were easy to understand
- 79% thought GPs were trustworthy and 66% easy to understand, but only 41% thought GPs were easy to access
- Pharmacists were seen as easy to access (76%), trustworthy (73%) and easy to understand (66%)
- The internet was viewed as easy to access (64%), particularly by younger patients, but only 15% viewed it as trustworthy



When they had a side effect they did something different!

- 70% had experienced at least one side effect from a medicine
- 63% were very confident this was due to their medicine and 28% fairly confident
- When they suspected they had a side effect, patients actually used the GP (69%) and the patient information leaflet (67%) most often.
- Only 28% of patients actually used a pharmacist for information, although pharmacists were easy to access, trustworthy and easy to understand
- But patients got information from multiple sources: 31% used two sources, 33% used three sources and 16% more than three. Only 20% had used only one source to confirm their view.



What this means

- Most patients experiencing suspected side effects consult a health professional.
- Talking to a health professional may increase confidence that an experience is a side effect.
- Patients do not ask for advice from pharmacists as often as from GPs, although they think pharmacists are just as trustworthy and easy to understand, but are more accessible.
- Many patients also use the patient information leaflet with medicines, but a lot of patients do not think these are easy to understand or even to be trusted.
- Despite the internet being regarded as untrustworthy, a lot of patients use it to find out about their medicines, but usually they use another source of information as well.

How you can use this research

Patient Information Leaflets are provided with every pack of medicines supplied in the UK. They are written in language designed to be easy to understand and are tested with patients and the public before they can be approved for use. They contain a list of most of the side effects which you are likely to experience from a medicine, but occasionally you may experience something not listed.

If you need help to understand the information in a Patient Information Leaflet, it is worth asking your pharmacist.

If you experience an unusual symptom after using a medicine, the pharmacist is an easily accessible source of information. If you use the same pharmacist all the time, they will have a list of all your medicines and can help to work out if one is possibly causing the symptom.

If you use the internet for information, always use trustworthy websites, like electronic medicines compendium (www.medicines.org.uk), NICE (www.nice.org.uk) or NHS choices

(www.nhs.uk/conditions/Medicinesinfo).