Codeine is widely used in healthcare mainly for the relief of mild to moderate pain and cough suppression. It is also used to a lesser degree as an anti-diarrhoeal agent (1). Pharmacists and pharmacy staff face many issues in identifying, addressing and monitoring codeine misuse and dependence (2). This factsheet offers information regarding the detection of codeine misuse and dependence based on the observations and experiences of pharmacists and pharmacy staff in South Africa.

**Regulation of codeine in South Africa**

Codeine is a listed narcotic drug that is regulated by the regulatory authority of medicines in individual countries. Pure codeine is listed under Schedule II, of the 1961 convention on Narcotic drugs. However, most codeine products are classified under Schedule III as they are compounded with one or more other ingredients (3). South African regulations stipulate permissible sale of over-the-counter codeine containing products (20mg or less of codeine phosphate and compounded with another drug) under supervision of the pharmacist, but with pack sizes containing up to 100 tablets. Codeine linctus is widely available and used in South Africa (2).

**Possible side effects of codeine consumption**

- Drowsiness
- Sleep disturbances
- Headache
- Nausea
- Constipation
- Cognitive impairment (mental clouding)
- Mood changes
- Depression
- Itching
- Sweating/clammy skin
- Bradycardia/tachycardia

**Common symptoms of codeine withdrawal**

- Preoccupation with seeking codeine
- Cravings
- Insomnia
- Restlessness
- Runny nose
- Stomach pains
- Diarrhoea
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Dehydration

**Adverse health effects of long term codeine consumption**

The following is a list of common health adverse effects with long term use of codeine:

- Gastric ulcers
- Gastrointestinal bleeding
- Hepatotoxicity
- Hyponatraemia
- Inflammatory bowel conditions
- Hyponatraemia associated with myopathy
- Nephron-toxicity
Triggers that alert to possible codeine misuse/abuse

- Requesting medication specifically by name
- Requesting larger doses of codeine
- Anxiety when suggesting medication change
- Defensive when asked about usage
- Complaining of unresolved pain and cough
- Chronic headaches
- Stress and depression
- Chronic constipation
- Attending pharmacies after hours
- Requesting second script for family member
- Forged or stolen prescriptions
- Repeated lost prescriptions
- Sending family members to collect prescription
- Unsanctioned dose escalations
- Other substance abuse problems

Treatment for codeine dependence:

- Gradual withdrawal and concurrent education and counselling
- Restricted prescriptions
- ‘Cold turkey’ (Stop medication)
- Substitution medication e.g. methadone, buprenorphine, other opioids
- Referral to specialists

Specific recommendations in relation to codeine use, misuse and dependence

- Raising public and professional awareness regarding codeine consumption
  - pharmacy training in detecting signs of misuse and dependence
  - pharmacy training in areas of addiction and communication skills
  - develop and disseminate key health related messages about the risks of exceeding therapeutic dosages of codeine based products.

- Detecting and managing risk
  - remove codeine products from view
  - strengthen warnings on products
  - develop in-house brief interventions
  - provide needle and syringe exchange services
  - develop and improve referral mechanisms to primary care teams

- Dispensing practises
  - clearer product labels identifying active ingredients
  - introduce short term restricted dispensing practices of codeine based products
  - assess each customer requesting codeine without bias regarding appearance
  - refuse sales to problematic users

- Monitoring and surveillance of codeine
  - monitor the use of prescription opioids in vulnerable populations.
  - share information in relation to codeine sales and consumers with other pharmacists
  - develop and evaluate ‘early warning systems’ in relation to codeine use, misuse and dependence (i.e. recording of adverse events).
  - Ensure routine enquiries by health professionals of patients with regard to prescribed and over the counter codeine medication use

Recent survey: Pharmacists opinions and responses to codeine misuse

- Codeine misuse is a serious public health issue
- Current control of codeine is not sufficient.
- Changes in packaging may assist with control of codeine (e.g. lower number of tablets in packaging and clear warnings of dangers).
- Most pharmacist refused to sell to customers when they suspected of codeine misuse and a small minority stated they ignored the problem.
- Many pharmacists offered advice and brief interventions to codeine misusers.
- A minority of pharmacists stated they engaged in slowly tapering amount of medication intake to avoid withdrawals.
- Over half of pharmacists had a system in place to 'red flag' clients who potentially misuse codeine.
Below are links to access further information

- http://www.codemisused.org/
- http://www.saams.co.za/

References

