

BHEKISISA TRACKING EMBED CODE

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Headline: [WATCH] How to stop South Africa's codeine problem

Blurb: More teens are showing up at drug treatment centres to kick a codeine habit. Some codeine products such as Stilpane are available over the counter without a prescription, so what can be done to prevent abuse? Find out in this video.

Bullets:

- A study of 31 countries ranked South Africa highest when it comes to how much over the counter codeine is sold in the form of painkillers or cough syrup. South Africa was the only African nation included in the review.
- The medicines regulator's data shows that some of these sales can be chalked up to misuse, especially at pharmacies where there are no trained staff on duty.
- Only 10% of pharmacies have opted into using a database set up to flag abuse of such medicines. Public health experts say the tool called the Codeine Care Initiative must be made mandatory.

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South Africa has a codeine problem.

The country is responsible for more than a third of global sales of over the counter codeine products.

South Africans buy about two bottles of medicine containing codeine each year.

Codeine is an opioid. People can get some formulations of the drug without a doctor's prescription because it's used in mild painkillers and cough syrup.

So where is it all going?

Some of the medicine is being used for legitimate reasons. One in five people in South Africa experience some form of chronic discomfort or pain.

But teenagers seem to be abusing codeine.

The number of adolescents being admitted at substance treatment centres to treat codeine dependence has risen.

Teenagers make up one in every three admissions of people trying to kick a codeine habit, up from one in every five admissions in 2016.

The medicines are often mixed with Sprite for a drink called “lean” which results in drowsiness and euphoria.

How do teens get access to codeines

At some pharmacies they are selling these products in bulk, shows data from the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority.

The biggest culprits are those pharmacies where there is no trained staff on duty.

Many facilities also fail to record people’s details when they buy codeine products. This process is supposed to prevent people from using more of the medicines than is safe.

What can be done?

1. Upscheduling.

Australia increased the scheduling of medicines that contain codeine in 2018.

The change was followed by a 90% drop in sales of low dose codeine medicines the following year.

Experts warn that this isn’t a good fit for South Africa because it would make pain medication unavailable for people who can’t get to a doctor or can’t afford to see one.

Then what?

2. The Codeine Care Initiative

The national database was launched in 2013.

It was supposed to pool information from different pharmacies to alert people when someone is hopping from one facility to the next to buy codeine products such as Stilpane.

The catch?

The programme wasn’t mandatory. As a result, only around 10% of pharmacies have opted in.

Experts say the database could be made compulsory by the medicines regulator.

That could help prevent some of the abuse, but such a system will still have loopholes since it wouldn't work at facilities that aren't connected to the internet.

This story was produced by the Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism. Sign up for the newsletter.