



OTC = Opportunity To Counsel

It is common knowledge that OTC stands for “Over The Counter” drugs—nonprescription medications readily available on store shelves in pharmacies and other retail locations. But recently I was thinking about the other things that OTC could stand for—things like “Opportunity To Confuse” or “Only Take Carefully” or maybe “Overwhelmingly Tough Choices.” Because really, that’s what nonprescription drugs can be for many people—confusing, hard to choose between, and with the potential for inappropriate use. Over the last few decades, the number of OTC products has grown exponentially as products have switched from prescription status and as OTC line extensions have grown. A patient with a stuffy nose, heartburn, or a headache, for example, is faced with racks of products, some with the same active ingredient, some different, some with the same brand name but different ingredients. A patient with arthritis is faced with an array of products— aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, naproxen sodium. How is someone without a medical background supposed to know how to make appropriate choices? This is why patients ask pharmacists for recommendations for these products and for assistance in their selection. And patients do ask. According to the results of APhA’s most recent OTC survey, pharmacists are asked about OTC products an average of 32 times a week. Fifty-five percent of pharmacists surveyed said that they spend 3 to 5 minutes with each patient who asks about OTC products. This time is obviously well spent, because the survey revealed that, on average, 81% of the time a pharmacist recommends an OTC product, the patient purchases that product.

As a general rule, pharmacists don’t stand in the OTC aisles waiting for someone to come and ask them a question. No, pharmacists are behind a counter—often a counter that has a long line of patients standing in front of it, waiting to pick up prescriptions. Besides being impractical, it is often impossible to step away from the counter. So when and how is a pharmacist supposed to get a chance to speak to a patient about OTCs? Two recent developments are likely to give pharmacists a chance to try out another

meaning of OTC—“Opportunity To Counsel.” The first is the migration (by many state laws, and probably soon federal laws) of pseudoephedrine products to be behind the counter. Although still available without a prescription, patients with stuffy noses and clogged sinuses will have to go to the pharmacy counter in order to get their decongestant. And while they are there, pharmacists have the perfect opportunity to make sure that patients are getting the proper product, that they know how to use it, and that they don’t have some underlying chronic condition that would make the product a poor or dangerous choice. OTC = Opportunity To Counsel.

The second opportunity arises from Medicare Part D. While the stated purpose of the medication therapy management portion of Medicare Part D is to counsel patients on prescription medications, any consultation on medications should include OTCs. No medication consultation could be complete without determining what medications a patient is taking—Rx or OTC. OTCs can be used to combat side effects of prescription medications (see “When prescription medications cause unwanted side effects” on page 23) and in some cases certain OTCs

could be a better choice for some people on Medicare (see “Medicare Part D and OTCs” on page 20).

The letters “OTC” can stand for a lot of things, but why not look at them as a positive? An opportunity to counsel is an opportunity to create a pharmacist-patient relationship and add meaning to your practice. It’s an opportunity to build business and gain customer loyalty. So the next time someone asks where the heartburn medications are, instead of pointing to aisle 12, why not ask patients what their symptoms are and whether they’ve taken any medication yet. Why not view OTC as “Opt To Change” and look at the nonprescription area as a gold mine for demonstrating the value of a pharmacist. You don’t need to stand in the OTC aisles—just take those everyday opportunities for counseling that OTCs provide and make the most of them. Taking those few minutes and turning them into an “Opportunity To Counsel” can earn you the moniker “One Truly Caring” pharmacist.

—Ann W. Latner, JD
Editor

