Alternative Medicine Use High Among Children

Children who regularly see specialists for chronic medical conditions are also using complementary medicine at a high rate, demonstrates recently published research from the University of Alberta and the University of Ottawa. About 71 percent of pediatric patients attending various specialty clinics at the Stollery Children's Hospital in Edmonton used alternative medicine, while the rate of use at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa was 42 percent. Nearly 20 percent of the families who took part in the study said they never told their physician or pharmacist about concurrently using prescription and alternative medicine.

Sunita Vohra, a researcher with the Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry at the U of A, was the lead investigator on the study, which was recently published in the peer-reviewed journal *Pediatrics*. Her co-investigator was W. James King from the University of Ottawa. "The children in this study are often given prescription medicines," says Vohra, a pediatrician who works in the Department of Pediatrics and the School of Public Health at the U of A.

"And many of these children used complementary therapies at the same time or instead of taking prescription medicine. We asked families if they would like to talk about the use of alternative medicine, more than 80 percent of them said, 'yes, please.'

"Right now, these families are getting information about alternative medicine from friends, family and the Internet, but a key place they should be getting this information from is their doctor or another member of their healthcare team, who would know about possible drug interactions with prescription medicines." Vohra said the study "identified a gap in communications" in dealing with pediatric patients and their families. "It's important to get these conversations going with every patient, especially when you consider it's not widely recognized how common it is for children with chronic illnesses to use alternative medicine," says the Alberta Innovates-Health Solutions scholar.

"We need to make sure these families are comfortable telling their specialists they are taking other therapies," she said. Right now, Vohra and her colleagues at the U of A have developed curricula for undergraduate medical students about the use of alternative medicine by pediatric patients. Ensuring medical students receive information about alternative medicine is key because it arms them with more knowledge about potential interactions with prescription medicine, says Vohra. "Considering parents are saying they want this information, we have an obligation to ensure future physicians have the education and resources they need for these conversations," Vohra says.

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