



Impact of Covid-19 on Cough, Cold & Flu Market

According to the latest report from Euromonitor International, the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that Irish consumers bought more cough and cold remedies in order to treat themselves at home, due to the lockdown which occurred in the spring and the subsequent social distancing restrictions.

The pandemic has influenced consumers to purchase OTC medications as part of preventative health measures to prepare a personalised health kit or medicine cabinet, which has resulted in purchases of traditional cough, cold and allergy remedies in case they may need to treat symptoms of any illness at home.

Despite the pandemic boosting sales of many categories of OTC medications, including adult cough, cold and allergy remedies, paediatric cough/cold remedies continued to see lower demand as a result of strict regulation by the Irish Health Product Regulatory Authority (HPRA) regarding the sale of cough/cold remedies to younger consumers due to advice from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the US and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in the UK which highlighted concerns regarding the safety of cough and cold medicines for use in children, particularly those under two years of age. The use of cough and cold medicines in older children continues to be under review.

Cough & Cold

The term “common cold” is widely used to describe an upper respiratory tract infection of viral origin. Adults in general suffer from cold approximately two to

four times annually while children can contract the virus three to eight times as their immune systems aren't as developed. Distinctive symptoms means that people often diagnose and treat themselves through a combination of self-care and OTC products, without needing to go to the doctor. If there is no improvement then an appointment with a doctor should be arranged. A GP can do an investigation to rule out whether the symptoms are being caused by a more serious infection, such as pneumonia or glandular fever.

All members of staff should be trained up on when to refer a patient for further medical attention, especially if they present with cold or flu-like symptoms that are accompanied by any of the following: high fever, vomiting, a non-blanching rash, photophobia, severe headache and/or confusion. Children presenting with high-pitched screaming, floppiness, bulging fontanelle, convulsions or stiff neck should go straight to A&E.

There is no cure for a cold, but certain measures can be taken to improve comfort levels while the virus dissipates: decongestants, antihistamines and pain relievers might offer some relief from symptoms however they won't stop a cold from developing

and will not shorten its duration. Vitamin C is useful for people in high risk groups who are at high risk of colds due to frequent exposure — for example, nurses or pharmacy staff. Echinacea and Zinc may also benefit patients during the cough and cold season however people should check with their doctors first as these can interfere with some medications. In general though, the best advice to patients suffering from a cough or cold this winter season is to rest, sip liquids, wash your hands, and to stay away from workplaces and school/college until symptoms have improved.

Influenza

Influenza is the winter ailment most likely to drive sufferers to the GP or to A&E, and nearly half of them will require antibiotics. The European Commission estimates that the seasonal flu vaccine prevents somewhere in the region of 37,000 deaths per annum in Europe. Pharmacists have been authorised to administer the flu vaccine, once appropriately trained, since October 2011. The uptake on the flu vaccine has increased every year since and research from the NHS has shown that people are more likely to avail of the flu vaccination service if it is convenient, quick and locally available.

As the vaccine can only be developed once the virus has been identified (which can take months), the European Commission and the European Medicines Agency work together to “speed up the marketing authorisation procedure once a pandemic has been declared.”

In order for the flu vaccination programme to maintain its ongoing success, there must be a high level of uptake among those aged sixty five years and older. At risk groups should also be targeted by pharmacy teams and the EU urges member countries to commit to vaccinating 75% of at risk groups each year. Those most at risk of developing serious complications from the flu virus include the youngest and the oldest, pregnant women, persons with a BMI over 40, patients with pre-existing long term conditions such as heart, kidney, liver, neurological disease or diabetes, smokers, and patients who are immunosuppressed or immunocompromised. It can also disproportionately affect people with Down syndrome and the virus is known to spread quickly in congregated settings, such as nursing homes or supported living environments. The HSE estimates that over one million people should be vaccinated in Ireland for the programme to be fully effective.





Category Focus: Cough, Cold & Flu



From the flu vaccine to OTC remedies to prescription antibiotics, winter is a good time to drive home the message that the local pharmacy is a one-stop-shop for all those seasonal ailments.

Effective Planning

The changing season brings opportunities to reorganise your store, to rearrange fixtures and fittings and to develop a clear merchandising plan featuring beacon brands in both the P and GSL sections. Planograms are helpful guides that can be used to assist with arranging retail shelves to help maximise front-end sales. These visual plans, that are backed by research, show exactly where in the store certain products should be placed and they indicate the products that will increase profits and move quickly. Store plans also show how products should be arranged based on the general categories and subcategories with the most profitable products typically going onto the shelf at eye level, known as the 'cone of vision'. Products that shoppers seek out no matter where they are, called destination items, can go on shelves outside of the cone of vision.

Have a look at the shelves that are devoted to winter remedies, both on the shop floor and on the medicines counter, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it clear to customers and staff which products are suitable for children and which are for adults only?
- Are your staff up-to-date and clear on the risk of analgesic overdose due to combination products?
- Are staff aware of the sales restrictions for certain decongestants?
- How could you make this fixture easier to understand and navigate?
- Are all staff clear on the symptoms that should ring an alarm bell if mentioned by a patient with a cough, cold or flu?
- Are details about your flu vaccination service clearly displayed?

Market Fluctuations

At the start of this year, we reported that sales of cold and flu

products at Irish pharmacies fell by as much as 80% in 2020 as a direct consequence of the pandemic.

The sharp decline in sales reflects the reduction in circulation of the usual cold and flu viruses following improved hand hygiene and cough etiquette measures in response to Covid-19.

Jack Shanahan of Haven Pharmacy Shanahan's, Castleisland has described the collapse of the cold and flu market as extraordinary.

The Kerry based pharmacist said in a remarkable development that sales of such products at his pharmacy have declined by about 80 to 90 per cent since the pandemic began, while colleagues at other pharmacies had also reported similar reductions.

"The cough and cold remedy as a category has collapsed, literally collapsed. There are no coughs and colds going round now other than Covid coughs and cold.

"We would have been selling hundreds of cold and flu remedies over the winter season usually and they're down to tens now. Sore throat sprays, cough bottles and cold and flu remedies have all gone down to maybe 10 to 20 per cent of what they normally would be."

"Colleagues are actually looking at the dates on cold and flu remedy stock wondering will they have it sold before they go out of date, which they would have never done. It's an extraordinary situation."

Intercontinental Medical Statistics (IMS) Industry data reveals a seasonal drop in pharmacy sales in 2020 of 62 per cent for the cold and flu category compared to 2019. The data is based on IMS "buy in" figures only, which are purchases by pharmacies.

Secretary General of the Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) Darragh O'Loughlin said the fall-off was to be expected, given the fact that influenza was not that widely in circulation.

"GP consultations for respiratory symptoms for the 2020/2021 season to date are reflecting Covid-19 activity, rather than influenza. That is probably as a result of the lack of international travellers to bring flu into the country along with people's handwashing, respiratory etiquette,

Cold vs Flu

Symptoms	Seasonal flu	Cold
Fever	High fever lasts 3-4 days	Rare
Headache	Prominent	Rare
General Aches, Pains	Usual; often severe	Slight
Fatigue, Weakness	Can last up to 2-3 weeks	Quite mild
Extreme Exhaustion	Early and prominent	Never
Stuffy Nose	Sometimes	Common
Sneezing	Sometimes	Usual
Sore Throat	Sometimes	Common
Chest Discomfort, Cough	Common; can become severe	Mild to moderate; hacking cough

mask wearing and physical distancing, which has all combined to help prevent the spread of flu and cold viruses."

According to Shanahan, the reduction in sales has been compensated "slightly" by the increase in purchases of vitamins and minerals, which customers are sourcing as part of Covid-19 prevention measures.

"There is a huge uptick in Vitamin C and Vitamin D for example. I won't say they are balancing each other out completely though, as it depends on everyone's own business model.

Sales of Vitamin D at his pharmacy have at least doubled in recent months due to emerging indications it may have a role in boosting immunity, he said.

At-risk patients include:

- Persons aged 65 years and older;
- Persons 10-64 with a chronic illness requiring regular follow up, e.g. chronic respiratory disease (including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cystic fibrosis, moderate or severe asthma and bronchopulmonary dysplasia), chronic heart disease (including acute coronary syndrome), chronic renal disease, diabetes mellitus, haemoglobinopathies, chronic liver disease, chronic neurological disease (including multiple sclerosis, hereditary and degenerative disorders of the central nervous system);
- Those who are immunosuppressed due to disease or treatment including those with missing or non-functioning spleens;
- All cancer patients;
- Patients with any condition that can compromise respiratory function, e.g. spinal cord injury, seizure disorder or other neuromuscular disorder;
- Persons with Down syndrome;
- Those with morbid obesity, i.e. body mass index over 40;
- all pregnant women (vaccine can be given at any stage of pregnancy);
- Healthcare workers;
- Household contacts of at-risk persons;
- Out-of-home care givers to at-risk persons
- Residents of nursing homes and other long-stay institutions;
- Carers; and
- People with regular contact with pigs, poultry or water fowl.