Do you really need those medications you see on TV? - Health and Medical Consumer N...

Posted by Dr. Randy Wexler, Ohio State University  June 04, 2008 01:01AM

Categories: Impact, Netwellness

You probably have noticed those ads on television encouraging you to try some medication for a health condition. These medications promise relief from various problems, such as gastric reflux, high cholesterol, erectile dysfunction and insomnia. Perhaps you’ve even thought about asking your doctor whether one of these drugs would help your medical condition.

Or maybe you have felt confused. More and more medications are on the market, but is a pill always the best way to fix what ails you?

Direct-to-consumer advertising

To sort this out, it might help to know a little more about the background of these television advertising practices, known as direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription medications. Only the United States and New Zealand allow direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription medications. The debate on the appropriateness of these ads began immediately when the Food and Drug Administration decided in 1997 to allow such practices. Proponents argue the ads provide an educational service that patients would not otherwise have. Opponents say the ads are misleading and entice patients to self-diagnose; they ask for medications they may not need or that have less expensive alternatives.

Doctors are on both sides of the issue

To be educational, an ad should be balanced, accurate, objective and should not promote unsafe practices. Although this may seem intuitive, it is often not the case. In a recent study, Dominick Frosch and colleagues completed a comprehensive analysis of DTCA. They found that the pharmaceutical companies used two major persuasive styles: Appeals, and Lifestyle Approaches.

The "appeals" approach

Many ads use appeal by showing attractive, happy people enjoying life. An illustrative example is a current ad for injectable insulin to treat diabetes in which an attractive middle-age woman rides her motorcycle on the open road to meet her friends for coffee and camaraderie.

But using injectable insulin to treat diabetes instead of oral medications leads to lower blood sugar episodes. That can cause many side effects, especially seizures -- certainly not something you want to happen while riding a motorcycle!

This ad also implies that insulin is the only way to control diabetes and be happy when, in fact, diet and exercise are the most important components of blood sugar control in a patient with adult onset, Type 2 diabetes.

The "lifestyle" approach
Lifestyle ads tend to show a patient with a particular problem engaged in physical activity. In a recent statin ad for low-cholesterol medication, a world-renowned physician was shown jogging with his son.

The implication was that without the medicine he was advertising, he would not be able to do this, which of course is not true.

In addition, he stated that the drug he was promoting was the most-studied of its class in the world. That might sound nice, but this has absolutely nothing to do with the use, quality or safety of the drug from the patient perspective.

This ad has since been cancelled pending Congressional probes into concerns that it failed to encourage patients to talk with their physicians about cardiovascular disease, the No. 1 cause of death in the United States.

Misdirecting the patients

There is a lot of misdirection in direct-to-consumer advertising. For example, a current ad for a nasal steroid proudly proclaims that its product is the only one FDA-approved for all the symptoms of allergies. This statement is irrelevant. All nasal steroid sprays treat all the symptoms of allergies. The only difference is that this particular pharmaceutical company is the only one that paid to do a study so that they could say so.

Brand name vs. generic drugs

Most of the drugs you see in direct-to-consumer advertising are for brand-name drugs that are losing market share to generic drugs within their class.

An example of this would be the ad for a combination drug that treats both blood pressure and cholesterol. This is only a brand-name drug because it is a combination pill. The two components of the drug (one for blood pressure and one for cholesterol) are comprised of drug classes with available generics.

With very rare exceptions, generic drugs are every bit as beneficial as brand name and a lot less expensive.

Benefits (and concerns) for consumers

Some studies have suggested that direct-to-consumer advertising may motivate consumers to ask better questions of their health-care providers. This improved communication has in some cases uncovered previously unrecognized and untreated medical conditions.

Fostering open and well-informed dialogue between patients and their doctors has the potential for improving health outcomes if it leads to significant health behavior changes, regardless of whether the individual is treated with the advertised medication.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that TV ads have a lower standard for disclosure of information than print advertising. Due to time limitations in broadcasting, TV drug ads cannot fully disclose all the risks and benefits that must be described in detail in a printed advertisement.

Although the FDA requires that TV drug ads provide fair balance with regards to risks and benefits, only "major risks information" must be revealed. Concern has been raised that direct-to-consumer advertising downplays harmful side effects of drugs while promoting their alleged benefits.

Talk to your doctor

Keep in mind that the purpose of direct-to-consumer advertising is to get you to purchase a specific medication. When watching such ads, it is educational to pay attention to the symptoms discussed and to the disease that causes them. If the ad provides a source of additional product information, you may want to review drug information from other credible resources as well.

Remember, the best way to treat your health-related condition is to start with an open-minded discussion with your physician. It could be that lifestyle change is all you need to achieve the health effect you want.
Do you really need those medications you see on TV? - Health and Medical Consumer N...