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(Im)patients plead for pills

As soon as she was diagnosed with high cholesterol, Maritza Cuestas got a prescription for medication from her doctor. The 50-year-old Palmdale, Calif., resident took the pills for a while but stopped because they gave her headaches.

"I don't like taking pills," Cuestas said. "Doctors give you something to try, but they don't really know if it's something you need."

Cuestas is now drinking celery juice, a tonic that her mother in El Salvador swears will help reduce cholesterol.

Cuestas' co-worker Josie Carrasco of Sylmar stands by garlic as a remedy for high cholesterol.

But in general, many Americans simply take a pill for high cholesterol and almost any other affliction — something Cuestas and Carrasco find frightening.

"It's not that there are too many pills; it's that people abuse them out of ignorance," Cuestas said as the two recently ate lunch in Woodland Hills.

"A lot of people prefer pills instead of eating right, instead of exercising."

Some health experts blame America's obsession with instant cures — overeagerness to be "pilled" and patched — on time constraints in an overworked society impatient to wait for results of lifestyle changes to kick in.

It is the American way.

"If you think about American culture, some people would say, 'Why take a pill?' Others will say, 'Why not?' Americans have a very can-do attitude, and we're not very patient," said Carol Scott, professor of marketing at the University of California, Los Angeles.

In its first week available without a prescription, the new diet pill Alli (pronounced like the word "ally") was reportedly selling briskly despite widely reported side effects such as involuntary bowel movements and other intestinal discomforts.

GlaxoSmithKline, which makes Alli, declined to give overall sales figures so far.

"We do know sales were ahead of expectations," said Malesia Dunn, spokeswoman for the company.

In 2002, the last year for which data is available, 45 percent of all Americans were taking at least one prescription drug, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Pharmaceutical companies and many doctors praise the promising research to develop drugs that will cure deadly diseases like cancer or allow people with some mental illnesses to carry on relatively normal lives. But critics say Americans are becoming too dependent overall — especially on feel-good, lifestyle drugs.

"If you go to a doctor and he or she doesn't suggest a prescription, you feel like you're not getting treatment," said Louis Rubino, the Health Sciences Department director at California State University, Northridge.

"It's wonderful we have the research and new discoveries, but look what we're doing. We're using pills for erections, to elevate our moods, to sleep."

Heavy use of prescription drugs has created its own problems, some doctors say. Rubino pointed to the overuse of antibiotics, which some worried moms seek whenever little Joey snuffles.

"Antibiotics aren't working any longer because there are different strains of illnesses that have become resistant," Rubino said.

The California Medical Association Foundation launched an educational campaign almost 10 years ago to warn against overusing antibiotics. By 2000, foundation officials say, 30 percent of infections in California were resistant.

Mass marketing

Part of the problem is aggressive advertising by drug companies eager to make it appear that the solution to everyone's problem can be found in what they are selling, critics say.

Several groups, including the California Medical Association, are opposed to direct advertising to consumers.

"Advertisers, if they are really successful, are able to tap into emotions and tendencies already there," Scott said. "Those commercials are really good at getting people to see their physician and request that drug. The whole idea of advertising is, they tell you, you can always be better."

And not at least offered a prescription, a patient can feel deprived.

Tea for two

In Los Angeles' predominantly Latino neighborhoods, prescription drugs tend to be viewed with some suspicion among newcomers, though attitudes begin to change as American values seep into households.

"When I was growing up, my grandmother believed in herbs," said Maria Sierra, 47, whose family has lived in the city of San Fernando, Calif., for several generations.

"My grandmother didn't have a normal backyard like everyone else," Sierra said. "Her backyard was filled with flowers and herbs for teas. Strangers would show up ... (on) her doorstep to ask for remedies."

Sierra said once, when she was uninsured, her mother gave her a tea to alleviate pain in her kidneys.

"Now that I work (and am insured), now that I'm older, I'll take the pills," she said.

Still, Rosie Jadidian, pharmacy director for Northeast Valley Health Corporation, said some Latino patients are hesitant to take their pills prescribed for chronic health conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes.

"When they don't really see or feel what the disease is doing, it takes a long time to warm up to a medication. ... I see a lot of motivation when they are here and they see a doctor, but then not so much enthusiasm once they get it home," Jadidian said.

Jadidian said patients have to be told directly what will happen if they do not take their pills.

"The issue hits them more when you tell men, for example, that if you don't control your high blood pressure, it can cause erectile dysfunction."

Where does it stop?

The number of prescriptions dispensed to U.S. patients increased by 4.6 percent in 2006, after a 3.2 percent increase in 2005. The increase was fueled by the Medicare Part D benefit, more use of generic drugs and the introduction of new drugs targeted to specific diseases such as cancer and diabetes, according to IMS Health, a consulting firm.

"This growth was driven by factors that include an aging population and the Medicare prescription drug benefit," an IMS report says.

The company predicts that sales growth will continue to increase moderately through 2010 as more generic products enter the market.
