



**Difficulty swallowing tablets:
Investigation of the frequency, the scale
and the consequences**

Master Thesis

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1. Abstract

Background

Few published studies suggested that swallowing difficulties can occur in any age group, although it is most common among elderly people. Swallowing difficulties can severely undermine good nutrition, impair quality of life as it can affect patients' ability to take solid oral dosage forms, thus compromising adherence and therapeutic outcome. In Switzerland, no study about medication-related swallowing difficulties in the community has been conducted until now.

Objectives

To investigate the frequency, the scale and the consequences of medication-related swallowing difficulties among ambulatory patients.

Methods

Patients who entered a community pharmacy with a prescription for at least 3 different solid oral forms were recruited from a random selection of community pharmacies in Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft. Patients' ability to swallow solid oral medications was enquired with semi-structured interviews. Pharmacists' awareness of swallowing difficulties was assessed with semi-structured interviews.

Results

A total of 30 pharmacies agreed to join the study. 19.1% of the 188 patients enrolled in the survey said they have or have had problems swallowing tablets or capsules and took on average 4.7 ± 2.2 (range 3–12) different medications. A prominent complaint was the size of the tablet, followed by the inadequate surface. Dafalgan was the most cited medication difficult to swallow (21.1%). Patients with current difficulties have had those difficulties on average for 1.6 ± 1.8 years (range 7 days–5 years) and patients with past difficulties had those difficulties on average for 0.5 ± 1.1 years (range 1.5 days–4.5 years). Most of the patients (52.8%) with present or past swallowing difficulties were limited in their daily activities. 41.7% of the patients with swallowing difficulties reported non adherence to a treatment regimen. Of the 51 pharmacists who were interviewed, 49 said they had met patients with swallowing difficulties in their pharmacy. Roughly half of them (53.1%) declared to speak about this problem with their patients, predominantly when they get big tablets.

Conclusion

This pilot study revealed that almost one fifth of patients with polymedication in the community experienced medication-related swallowing difficulties. To achieve good compliance and to enhance patients' satisfaction with treatment, it is important for healthcare professionals to be aware of the problems connected to swallowing tablets or capsules and to select the correctly formulated drug for those patients.