

Rising cost of health care fuels self-medication

During the flu and allergy seasons, consumers turn to self-medication to build up their immune systems, preferring anti-flu tablets, cough medicines and antihistamines to avoid expensive doctor's visits.



The rising cost of healthcare means that many South Africans have far less money to spend on treatments for illness. Consumers are thus increasingly opting for self-medication, a trend encouraged by widening access to the internet. A growing number of people are researching their health concerns and potential remedies online, even before seeking the advice of pharmacists. This trend is increasing consumers' confidence in their ability to self-medicate.

“We have seen an increase in spend on natural health products, complementary and alternative medicines. This is a clear indicator that consumers are looking to alternative ways to stay healthy and prevent expensive hospital visits,” says Bruce Dennison, president of the Health Products Association of South Africa (HPASA).

A contributing factor to this self-medication trend may be South Africa’s rising unemployment figures, which increases the fear of job losses and make those lucky enough to be in employment reluctant to take time off work to visit the doctor. “This has notably benefited areas such as cough remedies and combination products in analgesics and cough, cold and allergy (hay fever) remedies.”

Self-medication is not the only route out of poor health, however. “People are realising that their illnesses could be linked to their diet and they’re therefore starting to make smarter nutritional choices,” adds Andrea du Plessis, nutritional expert at

Vital Health Foods. She points out that heart disease and diabetes are just two illnesses that can be linked to unhealthy food choices. A change in diet could save consumers money, as this could ultimately result in their spending less money in the doctor's room.

Other optional and expensive lifestyle habits, such as drinking alcohol and smoking, contribute to poor health. According to the World Health Organization, South Africa is one of the top 20 biggest alcohol-drinking nations in the world and the third biggest in Africa. With 'sin taxes' on booze and cigarettes having increased this year, it makes all-round financial sense to quit both.

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