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Adolescents experience with pain in daily life: a qualitative study on ways to cope and the use of over-the-counter analgesics

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Background & Aim: During the last decades there has been a marked increase in the use of over-the-counter analgesics (OTCA) among adolescents. Differences in pain management strategies and attitudes towards medication might relate to each adolescent's personality and coping style. The aim was to explore different patterns among the adolescents in pain descriptions, in the management of pain, and in relationships with others.

Method: Semi-structured interviews with 25 adolescents from six junior high schools stratified on gender, school and foreign or native mother tongue. The main topics were their interactions with family and friends, leisure activities, pain descriptions, pain management, and their own use and attitudes to OTCA. For these topics main domains were identified and the adolescents were then grouped according to similarities on all these domains.

Results: We describe four ways of experiencing and approaching pain; Pain is manageable, pain is communicable, pain is inevitable, and pain is all over. In the first group pain experiences were mainly in extremities, the second and third group mainly in the head and muscles, and the last group more generalized. The first two groups had a stepwise approach to pain management, the third group had a trial and error approach, and the last group had no strategy for pain management using OTCA. The first group was autonomous, the second group had rules guiding management from their parents, the third group involved parents when in pain, and in the last group their mothers were partners in pain. The two first groups more or less oriented their life out of the family context, while the third and especially the fourth group were heavily involved with family affairs.

Conclusions: When advising adolescents on the use of OTCA, one should acknowledge different ways of experiencing and approaching pain.