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Team Pharmaca: An alternative way to get your medicine

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If there is any question as to who is driving health care decisions these days, just watch who walks through the doors of the new Pharmaca store in Monterey.

Women entering their graying years, pregnant women, women with children in tow.

While its official grand opening is slated for Friday, Pharmaca, a Colorado-based company that combines the traditional pharmacy concept with alternative medicine and natural beauty products, quietly opened for business at 570 Munras Ave. on Tuesday in a storefront next to Trader Joe's. The retailer, which focuses its locations on upscale communities, plans an open house this evening, followed by a weekend of free health screenings, giveaways and free chair massages.



V. Banks, left, gets advice on immune care from nutritionist Ana Poirier... (DAVID ROYAL/The Herald)

Since opening its flagship store in Boulder, Colo., in 2000, Pharmaca has expanded to 19 locations in Colorado, Washington, New Mexico, Oregon and California. The company locates its stores in upscale, highly educated communities, said marketing coordinator Alexis Speros, with existing California stores in Berkeley, La Jolla, Mill Valley, Irvine, Los Gatos, Napa, Novato, Pacific Palisades, Sonoma and San Francisco.

Those demographics are most suited for consumers who take responsibility for their health, and mostly it is women who are leading the charge, she said.

According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, 36 percent of American adults use some form of complementary and alternative medicine. The company's goal is to meld that with the world of traditional medicine so that customers can find all their health care needs — from preventative health care to prescription drugs — under one roof.

In a sense, Pharmaca is to pharmacies what Whole Foods is to grocery stores: a place that sells groceries but a whole lot more.

What customers will find in its 4,000-square-foot Monterey store are a team of pharmacists, as well as a staff herbalist, naturopathic doctor, nutritionist, acupuncturist/herbalist and a licensed esthetician.

They will find aspirin and Alka-Seltzer and Band-aids, but herbal-based formulas and homeopathic products, vitamins and Neti pots offered on premium shelf space next to their traditional counterparts.

"What we want to give consumers is a choice," said Speros.

Organic cotton bathrobes share shelf space next to bamboo fiber towels in sunny Caribbean colors. There are racks of reading glasses, but two of the main brands — Zoom and Icu — offer frames made from recycled plastic. The CDs for sale include Spanish gypsy music and guided meditation, the snacks are natural, health-conscious products. The cosmetics section stocks traditional beauty lines such as Cetaphil and a variety of organic products and phthalate-free perfumes and products, and the baby products section includes phthalate- and PVC-free toys and baby food grinders and chlorine-free diapers.

Women to the fore

Women make up the largest component of Pharmaca's customers, said Christopher Turf, Pharmaca's director of integrative pharmacy, evidence that it is females that mostly take the lead in their family's health care and in preventive health maintenance. Pharmaca's concept is particularly popular with pre- and post-menopausal women looking to take better control of their health, he said, and the company's frequent education events — including a Feb. 28 talk on menopause by Dr. Tori Hudson on menopause — are always well-received.

Turf, who is based in Pharmaca's Boulder branch, said he found that customers are frequently seeking ways to be more in control of their health and Pharmaca strives to fill that need.

"People have certain expectations about how their health care experience is going to be, and typically Western medicine isn't particularly geared to that," said Turf. "There is nothing more important than your health care."

In addition to traditional prescription services, the pharmacy offers prescription compounding, which allows customers to adjust dosages, or change the format of a medication from pill to capsule or liquid. The pharmacy can create fruit-flavored lollipops, gummy bears or freezer pops for children's medications, and for customers with special needs or allergies, they can blend medications free of preservatives, lactose, dyes or sugar.

Even pet prescriptions can be compounded to adjust for dosage, size or form, said Turf. Cats that particularly hate to take pills can get medications through ear gels or flavored oils. For dogs, there are bacon- or chicken-flavored treats.

Take-back medicines

Pharmaca is launching a take-back program designed to keep unused medications out of landfills or water sources. Customers can bring in unused or expired medicines to the store, where they will be collected for eventual incineration.

According to the Teleosis Institute, a nonprofit Berkeley-based organization dedicated to sustainable health care, more than 80 percent of the nation's waterways have traces of common pharmaceutical drugs.

As an incentive to customers, the store is offering \$1 store coupons for each bottle brought in during the store's first 90 days, said Speros.

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Pharmaca

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