

Uses and Attitudes About Taking
Over-the-Counter Medicines:
*Findings of a 2003 National Opinion Survey Conducted for
The National Council on Patient Information and Education*

Executive Summary

When the National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE) launched its *Be MedWise* campaign in January 2002 to promote the wise use of over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, the organization released the findings of a new opinion research study about the self-medicating behaviors of the American public. Conducted by Harris Interactive, this study consisted of two complementary polls conducted between October and December 2001: one of adult Americans and the other involving pharmacists, nurses and general practice physicians. By comparing and contrasting the attitudes and beliefs of the general public with health practitioners, the study identified those areas where education about OTC use was especially needed.

Since May 2002, the majority of OTC medicines have been required to carry a standardized “Drug Facts” label. Mandated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), this standardized label format is intended to make it easier to select the most appropriate OTC product and to understand a drug’s risks and benefits. NCPIE’s *Be MedWise* campaign has made education about the new label a priority, and has used a wide variety of media channels – the mass media, print and broadcast advertising, the Internet, and consumer education materials – to promote the message that OTC medicines, like prescription drugs, must be taken with care.

To gauge the initial impact of these efforts, in 2003, NCPIE commissioned Harris Interactive to conduct a follow-up survey that charts where progress is being made and where continued emphasis on consumer education about OTC medicines can prove beneficial. Conducted in May and June, this poll of 1,009 adult Americans provides an updated look at consumer use of OTC labels as well as potential problem areas regarding OTC medicines use.

What follows is a summary of these research findings:

- 1. A year after the “Drug Facts” label has been required on most OTC medicines, a majority of those polled (56 percent) is aware of this important information tool.**
- 2. At the same time, consumers are increasing their use of important label information when selecting and using OTC products.**
 - More than two in five consumers (44 percent) report they consult the label for the active ingredient in the OTC product -- up from 34 percent in the previous NCPIE survey.
 - Moreover, one in five consumers (20 percent) reports reading the label for possible side effects compared to only 10 percent who looked for this information in 2001.
 - There has been an increase in the number of consumers who report reading the label for dosage instructions. Whereas only 16 percent of those polled in 2001 took this step, the new survey finds that almost one in four (23 percent) report seeking out dosage information when buying a nonprescription product.
 - However, eight percent still don’t read anything on the label.
- 3. While label reading has improved over a two-year period, many Americans still have an incomplete knowledge about OTC medicines and may be taking too much of a single product or mixing OTC medicines inappropriately.**
 - According to the new poll, almost half of respondents (48 percent) say there are times when they have taken more than the recommended dose of a nonprescription medicine, believing that it will increase the effectiveness of the product. Of these consumers, 35 percent say they take the next dose sooner than directed; 32 percent take more than the recommended amount at a single time; and 18 percent report taking the medicine more times during the day than recommended on the label.

- The new poll also finds that more than half of respondents (51 percent) report having taken an OTC medicine and a prescription drug simultaneously. Problems could arise after concurrent use of prescription and OTC medicines that have the same active ingredient.
- These findings reinforce what the previous NCPIE survey of health professionals revealed about the ways in which consumers may be taking nonprescription medicines incorrectly. Specifically, practitioners cited these factors: combining OTC and prescription medicines (51 percent); the chronic use of an OTC medicine (44 percent); using an OTC drug for a prescription indication (32 percent); and taking more than one OTC product at a time that has the same active ingredient (27 percent).

4. Besides new and easy-to-read label information, the involvement of health practitioners can be beneficial to consumers' selection and appropriate use of OTC medicines.

- According to the consumer poll, two-thirds of adults (66 percent) say that selecting a nonprescription medicine can be a challenge because of the wide range of competing products now available.
- Despite this fact, most consumers don't think to consult with their community pharmacist before buying or using an OTC medicine, even though pharmacists are specially trained to counsel consumers about these products. According to the survey, only four in ten consumers (43 percent) consult a pharmacist when buying a nonprescription medicine.
- Encouraging a better dialogue between consumers and their pharmacists and other health professionals is an important way to support consumers' selection and appropriate use of OTC medicines. The poll finds that most Americans would buy a particular OTC medicine based on their pharmacist's recommendation (80 percent), or not purchase a specific OTC drug if their pharmacist advised against it (82 percent).

- Moreover, the previous NCPIE survey found that many pharmacists are ready to play a counseling role about OTC medicine use. According to that report, the vast majority of pharmacists (72 percent) reported spending more than a minute providing advice about when and how to take these products correctly.

The new NCPIE survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,009 adult Americans aged 18 and over conducted on May 29 through June 1, 2003. To ensure a reliable and accurate representation of the total national adult population, complete interviews were weighted to known proportions for age, gender, geographic region, and race. The margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 3.1 percent.

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