

**The Attitudes and Beliefs About
Over-the-Counter Medicines:**
*A National Opinion Survey Conducted for
The National Council on Patient Information and Education*

An Executive Summary

When it comes to treating such common ailments as coughs and colds, fever, heartburn, and aches and pains, more Americans are using more types of nonprescription, over-the-counter (OTC) medicines than ever before. Once consisting of a relatively small number of medications, OTC medicines now account for the majority of all medications used in the United States, including many that were once available only by prescription. According to the Consumer Healthcare Products Association (CHPA), there are more than 100,000 OTC drug products on the market today encompassing about 1,000 significant active ingredients. At the same time, more than 700 OTC remedies contain ingredients and dosages that were only available by prescription less than 30 years ago.

With so many Americans using so many OTC medicines, an important question for the public health community is, “how well do consumers understand and process essential information about OTC products?” This question is particularly relevant now that the majority of OTC products are converting to a federally mandated “Drug Facts” label in 2002. Required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the new label will make it easier to select the most appropriate OTC product and understand a drug’s benefits and risks. However, developing programs to promote the new label first requires an assessment of the extent to which the facts contained on the label are now being incorporated into the public’s decisions about self-care.

Towards this end, the National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE) commissioned a comprehensive survey to track the opinions influencing the self-medicating behaviors of the American public. Conducted by Harris Interactive, the survey consisted of two complementary polls: one of 1,011 adult Americans aged 18 and over conducted between October and November 2001, and the other involving 451 pharmacists, nurses and general practice physicians who were surveyed in November and December 2001. By comparing the attitudes and beliefs of the general public with health practitioners, the survey identified the areas where education about OTC use is most needed.

What follows is a summary of these research findings:

1. The majority of Americans take nonprescription medicines routinely for a variety of common ailments.

- Today, three in five Americans (59 percent) report having taken at least one OTC drug product in the past six months. In fact, slightly more Americans have taken an OTC medicine during the last six months than a prescription drug (54 percent).
- Americans take OTC medicines for a wide variety of ailments. Most commonly they are taken for: pain (78 percent); a cough, cold, flu or sore throat (52 percent); allergy or sinus problems (45 percent); heartburn, indigestion and other stomach problems (37 percent); constipation, diarrhea and gas (21 percent); minor infections (12 percent); and skin problems (10 percent).

2. Despite widespread use of nonprescription medicines, many consumers need more information about when and how to take these products.

- Of special concern to health professionals is a lack of understanding about active ingredients in OTC medicines, especially since different OTC products may contain the same active ingredient. Of the 79 percent of physicians, nurses and pharmacists in the poll who say that the potential for inappropriate use of OTC remedies is a concern, seven in ten (69 percent) cite not understanding active ingredients as the biggest problem.
- This is confirmed by the consumer poll, which found that only 34 percent of the public could identify the active ingredient in their brand of pain reliever.
- In addition, only one in ten (11 percent) correctly say that nonprescription medicines formulated for babies are usually more concentrated than formulations for older children.

3. At the same time, consumers tend to overlook important label information when selecting and using OTC products.

- Although the vast majority of Americans (95 percent) read some portion of the OTC drug label, the survey finds that many do so

selectively when buying or using a nonprescription medicine. When asked what information they look for when **buying** an OTC drug for the first time, two in five (41 percent) cite usage information (e.g., directions for use, information on dosage level and symptoms), one in three (34 percent) mention the active ingredient, and one in five (21 percent) say warnings information.

- Similarly, half (51 percent) of those surveyed say they seek out usage information when they plan to **take** an OTC product for the first time. However, only 20 percent look for the active ingredient.

4. Because some Americans have an incomplete knowledge about OTC medicines, they may take too much of a single product or mix OTC drugs inappropriately.

- According to the consumer poll, a third of Americans say they take more than the recommended dose of a nonprescription medicine, believing that it will increase the effectiveness of the product. Of these consumers, two thirds (69 percent) say they take more than the recommended amount at a single time; three fifths (63 percent) report taking the next dose sooner than directed; and two fifths (44 percent) say they take more than the recommended number of doses in a day.
- At the same time, a third of Americans (36 percent) say they are likely to combine nonprescription medicines when they have multiple symptoms, like a headache and a sore throat. This practice can increase the risk that consumers take more than one OTC product at a time that contains the same active ingredient.
- These findings were reinforced in the poll of health professionals where practitioners cited a number of ways in which consumers may be taking nonprescription medicines incorrectly. Among the 79 percent of physicians, nurses and pharmacists who said they were concerned about the problem, 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).

5. Besides new and easy-to-read label information, the involvement of health practitioners will increase the public's ability to understand the risks and benefits of OTC remedies.

- According to the consumer poll, almost as many consumers get their information about nonprescription medicines from the mass media (49 percent) as they do from health professionals (57 percent).
- This is not because health professionals are unwilling to discuss OTC use with their patients. In fact, three in four of the practitioners surveyed (75 percent) say they ask their patients/customers directly about OTC drug use most or all of the time. Only one-quarter of health professionals (27 percent) say they wait for patients to volunteer information about their OTC use.
- When discussing the use of nonprescription medicines, the survey finds that the majority of practitioners (65 percent) spend more than a minute offering specific counseling. Most of this time is spent on: how to take a product (62 percent); what OTC drug to use (56 percent); how well the product works (54 percent); drug interactions (50 percent); taking more than one OTC drug at a time (49 percent); cautions prior to or following surgery (43 percent); and taking more than the recommended dose of an OTC medicine (42 percent).

The Harris survey comprised two complementary telephone surveys: one of 1,011 adult Americans aged 18 and over conducted between October 25 and November 11, 2001; and the other a survey of three groups of medical practitioners between November 17 and December 7, 2001. Of the 451 health professionals surveyed, 150 were physicians in general practice, 150 were nurses, and 151 were pharmacists.

More information about this survey is available at www.bemedwise.org.
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