

## Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a national survey examining public opinion on the safety of marketed health products in Canada. The research aimed to understand Canadians' awareness and information use pertaining to the safety of health products, and to identify the most commonly-used sources of this information. The study also examined Canadians' views on the responsibility of different stakeholders in drug safety, and measured confidence in the systems in place to safeguard health products. Canadians' awareness and experience with adverse drug reactions (ADRs) was also explored.

The following are the key findings from this research.

**Canadians generally consider health products to be safe. They also have confidence in the systems in place to ensure the safety of these products.**

Canadians are most likely to consider prescription drugs very or generally safe, followed by non-prescription drugs, and natural health products. In addition, no less than seven in ten are very or somewhat confident in the knowledge of health care professionals and in their sharing of this information, how the federal government regulates drug safety and effectiveness, and how drug companies ensure safety and effectiveness of health products.

**Canadians are satisfied with the drug safety information available to them.**

Canadians are most satisfied with the information available about prescription drugs and somewhat less satisfied with the availability of safety information for natural health products. The small group that is dissatisfied say this is primarily because they do not have enough information, or that the information available to them is incomplete.

**Large majorities are of the view that consumers, the federal government and health care professionals should share the responsibility for drug safety.**

Drug safety is primarily seen to be a shared responsibility between stakeholders. Canadians most commonly ascribe shared responsibility to patients or consumers, health care professionals, and the federal government. Four in ten do, however, say that drug companies should be *solely* responsible for drug safety.

No less than two in three Canadians are very likely to take a variety of actions related to the safe use of drugs or other health products. These

include: reading product labels and following directions; reporting reactions; informing themselves about potential reactions or effects; and asking their health care professional for information about drug safety.

**Canadians most often seek information about prescription drugs and most commonly look for information about side effects.**

While about six in ten say they always seek out safety information about a prescription drug when taking it for the first time, fewer Canadians always seek information about natural health products (just under half) or non-prescription drugs (one-third). Those seeking safety information most commonly look for possible side effects, regardless of the type of product used. Those who use natural health products also seek safety information about the effectiveness of the product.

Pharmacists are a key source of information for those taking prescription or non-prescription drugs, while the Internet is the primary source for those taking natural health products.

**Canadians are less inclined to seek out new information about products they have already started taking.**

A minority of Canadians regularly seek out additional safety information once taking a health product. They will most often seek additional information based on what they read on product packaging or labels, or what they see or hear in the media. The Internet is the most commonly used source when looking for new information about a product they are already taking.

**About one-third of Canadians say they are aware of Health Canada's website as a source of new safety information about health products. Two-thirds are aware of public advisories or warnings.**

Twice as many Canadians report awareness of public warnings or advisories issued through the media than the Health Canada website. One in ten Canadians have used the web site in the past six months for new safety information about drugs and other health products, among this group satisfaction is very high.

**About one in three Canadians say they are likely to subscribe to MedEffect.**

One percent of participating Canadians subscribe to MedEffect's e-Notice now and another one in three say they are likely to subscribe to this service in the near future. Those not likely to subscribe to MedEffect are unlikely because they are uncomfortable with technology, because they believe they are healthy, or because they are not interested.

**Four in ten regularly think about ADRs when taking drugs or other health products. One-quarter are aware of Health Canada’s role in ADR reporting.**

Four in ten Canadians always or frequently think of ADRs when taking a new drug, most often because of experience. Those who have experienced an ADR are most likely to contact their physician. The likelihood of reporting ADRs would likely be higher if Canadians understood the importance of reporting them, and how to do so. The majority of Canadians say they would be most comfortable reporting an ADR to their physician.

**Canadians’ attitudes and behaviours related to marketed health products vary by gender, age, and region.**

Women are generally more likely to have used health products than men, and they have slightly less confidence in the systems in place to ensure drug safety. Consequently, they are more likely to take a variety of measures to ensure drug safety, and they are more alert to potential ADRs when taking new drugs.

The opinions of Canadians under the age of 35 differ from older Canadians in certain respects. Younger Canadians are less likely to search for information about a new product, or one they have been taking. They are also less likely to consider an ADR when taking a new drug.

Residents of Quebec differ from other Canadians in a variety of areas. Quebecers have more confidence in how stakeholders ensure the safety and effectiveness of health products, and are more apt to believe that health care professionals should have sole responsibility for ensuring drug safety. Quebecers are less likely than others to seek out information when taking a new prescription drug on an ongoing basis. They also have lower awareness of Health Canada public advisories. In relation to ADRs, Quebec residents would be more comfortable than others reporting to a doctor.

## Conclusions and Observations

The results of this research lead to the following conclusions.

1. Canadians are fairly confident that drugs and health products for sale in Canada are safe, because of the systems in place to ensure the safety of these products.

This overarching sentiment relates to many of the other findings in this study. For instance, more Canadians believe prescription drugs to be safe, than believe this for non-prescription medications or natural health

products. This follows, given that prescription drugs are prescribed by physicians and controlled by pharmacists.

2. Canadians feel a responsibility for drug safety, one that is shared with the federal government, health care professionals and drug companies. The key, however, appears to be that Canadians have confidence in the knowledge of their health care professionals about the safe use of drugs and that these professionals will share that information with them.

Canadians, to a large extent, appear reliant on doctors and pharmacists for much of their safety information, especially in relation to prescription medications. They appear to see their own main role as reading the materials, such as product labels, and following instructions for use.

3. The majority of Canadians do not seek out drug safety information except at the time of first purchase, meaning from a doctor or pharmacist. Only about one in ten Canadians have accessed Health Canada's website for safety information in the past six months, and very few currently subscribe to MedEffect's mailing list. However, satisfaction among users of the Health Canada website is fairly high, suggesting increased awareness could lead to greater use.
4. Overall, Canadians appear satisfied with the health product safety information available and, in the absence of a major risk event, appear unlikely to change their behaviour in this regard. They are generally confident in the systems in place to ensure their safety, and appear comfortable with the information they receive and the sources they obtain it from. Consequently, increasing the use of Health Canada's information sources – the web site and MedEffect mailing list, will be challenging. If Health Canada wishes to increase usage of these tools, it will be necessary to increase public awareness of them, and to communicate a rationale for using them – why the public should be looking for additional information. This also appears to be true for increased reporting of ADRs; an effort to increase these reports will need to be built on increased awareness of why this is important and of how to proceed.

Increasing awareness of the Health Canada / MedEffect website will likely also assist the minority of Canadians who are not satisfied with the quantity and/or completeness of the product safety information available to them.

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