

Tracey Mc Nerney
585.214.7756
tmcnerney@harrisinteractive.com

U.S. Adults Concerned about Potential Risks of Prescription Medications, But Many Not Taking Steps to Decrease Risks

WSJ.com/Harris Interactive Health-Care Study Finds That Only Half Talk to Their Doctor about Other Drugs

A new Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Health-Care Poll shows that most U.S. adults are concerned about the potential side effects of pain medications (79%) and the potentially harmful interactions between pain medications and other prescription medications (82%). Additionally, half (52%) of U.S. adults believe the abuse of prescription medications poses a problem equal to the abuse of illegal drugs. Information from the DEA asserts that nearly one in ten high school seniors admit to abusing powerful prescription pain killers, and that opioid painkillers cause more overdose deaths than cocaine and heroin combined.

These are some of the results of an online survey of 2,027 U.S. adults conducted by Harris Interactive between February 19 and 21, 2008 for the Wall Street Journal Online's Health Industry Edition.

Katherine Binns, President of the Healthcare Division at Harris Interactive, said "The news of Heath Ledger's death being possibly linked to an overdose of prescription medications recently brought this issue into the forefront, and it appears that abuse of prescription medications is becoming an increasing problem in our society. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates that nearly seven million Americans abuse prescription drugs, an increase of 80 percent since 2000, and more than the number who abuse cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, Ecstasy and inhalants combined."

According to our study, almost half of U.S. adults always or often keep their prescription medications where others cannot access them (46%), and similar numbers keep a record of prescription medications taken regularly (42%). These safeguards could help avoid potential problems, yet are not in place by most adults. Furthermore, a third admit to having ever shared their prescription medications with family members (31%) and taking higher doses of prescription pain or other medications than prescribed by their doctor (30%), although most say they have done these activities only sometimes or rarely.

When prescribed a new prescription, about half (55%) of U.S. adults say they always or often talk to their doctor about other prescription drugs they are taking, and about the same percentage (58%) look for information about potential risks associated with the medication. However, minorities talk to their doctor about other over-the-counter (OTC) medications (41%) or nutritional/herbal supplements (28%) they are taking. Even fewer adults talk their pharmacist about potential interactions with other prescription drugs (24%), OTC medicines (19%) and nutritional/herbal supplements (13%).

Growing issues related to painkillers and other prescription medications leads to increased awareness and concern among the public. It will be interesting to discover in future polls if more adults are taking steps to help protect themselves and their families from problems associated with prescription drugs.

Health-Care Poll

Table 1

Bigger Problem: Prescription Medications vs. Illegal Drugs

“Based on what you know or have heard, which do you think poses a bigger problem in the U.S. – people abusing prescription medications or illegal drugs?”

Base: All adults

	Total
	%
Abusing illegal drugs	22
Abusing prescription medications	18
Both equally	52
Not sure	7

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Table 2

Concerns About Prescription Pain Medications

“Based on what you know or have heard how concerned are you about...?”

Base: All adults

		Very/ Somewhat Concerned (NET)	Very Concerned	Somewhat Concerned
The potential side-effects of prescription pain medications	%	79	38	41
Potentially harmful interactions between prescription pain medications and other prescription medicines	%	82	41	41
The risk of addiction associated with some prescription pain medications	%	70	34	36

		Not At All/ Not Very Concerned (NET)	Not Very Concerned	Not At All Concerned	Not Sure
The potential side-effects of prescription pain medications	%	18	12	6	3
Potentially harmful interactions between prescription pain medications and other prescription medicines	%	15	11	5	3
The risk of addiction associated with some prescription pain medications	%	27	19	8	3

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Health-Care Poll

Table 3
Medication Habits
“How often do you personally do the following?”
Base: All adults

		Ever (NET)	Always/ Often/ Some- times (Sub- Net)	Always/ Often (Sub- Sub- Net)	Always	Often	Some- times	Rarely	Never
Keep your prescription medications where others can't access them	%	76	61	46	29	17	15	16	24
Keep a paper or electronic record of all the prescription medications you take regularly (i.e., how many, how often and what dosages)	%	57	45	32	22	10	13	12	43
Share prescription medications with other members of your family	%	31	12	2	*	2	10	20	69
Take higher doses of prescription pain or other medications than prescribed by your doctor	%	30	10	1	*	1	9	20	70

*= Less than 0.5 percent.

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Health-Care Poll

Table 4

Medication Information

“When you are prescribed a new prescription drug, how often do you personally...?”

Base: All adults

		Ever (NET)	Always/Often/Sometimes (Sub-Net)	Always/Often (Sub-Sub-Net)	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Talk to your doctor about other prescription drugs you are taking	%	86	78	56	35	20	22	9	14
Talk to your doctor about over-the-counter medicines that you are taking	%	84	71	41	22	19	30	13	16
Talk to your doctor about nutritional or herbal supplements you are taking	%	68	52	29	16	12	23	16	32
Talk to a pharmacist about other prescription drugs you are taking	%	73	53	25	12	12	29	20	27
Talk to a pharmacist about over-the-counter medicines that you are taking	%	71	48	19	8	11	29	23	29
Talk to a pharmacist about nutritional or herbal supplements you are taking	%	53	32	13	5	8	19	22	47
Look for information about the potential risks associated with the medication	%	91	83	59	31	27	25	8	9

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Health-Care Poll

Downloadable PDFs of Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Health-Care Polls are posted at http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_wsj.asp.

Methodology

Harris Interactive conducted this online survey within the United States between February 19 and 21, 2008 among a national cross section of 2,027 adults age 18 and over. Figures for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, income and region were weighted where necessary to align with population proportions. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the U.S. adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to be invited to participate in the Harris Interactive online research panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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Media inquiries, contact:

Tracey McNerney 585.214.7756

tmcnerney@harrisinteractive.com