



Survey of Parents on Key Issues Related to Immunization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Public Health Agency of Canada

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Quantitative research was conducted with Canadian parents in order to understand their perceptions and information needs related to childhood immunizations. Telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of 1,745 Canadian parents, screening for those who had at least one child under the age of 18. Interview questions investigated Canadian parents' knowledge, awareness, attitudes and behaviours related to immunization. Findings from this research will be used to inform public education strategies and initiatives.

Incidence of Immunization

Nine in ten parents indicated that their child's immunizations are up to date, while one in ten reported that their child had missed at least one of the recommended vaccines. The most commonly missed vaccines include: seasonal flu, chicken pox, Hepatitis B and MMR. Twenty-eight percent of parents who say their child has missed an immunization feel that vaccines are unnecessary, arguing instead that the human body is fully capable of caring for itself. Sixteen per cent of parents within this segment do not believe in vaccine use, either for philosophical reasons or as a consequence of religious beliefs, and a similar proportion has concerns about the safety of vaccines.

The survey also explored the incidence of HPV immunization and parents' attitudes toward this vaccine in particular. Of households where there is at least one girl of eligible age in her province to receive the HPV vaccine, approximately half reported that their daughter received the vaccine. Another 31 per cent of parents, who had not yet had their daughter immunized, indicated that they would do so in the future. For most parents, protection against cancer is the primary driver of the decision to immunize against HPV.

Finally, the survey also explored the incidence of H1N1 immunization. Half of parents indicated that their child had received the H1N1 vaccine. A similar proportion (44%) reported that they would be highly likely to have their child immunized in the event of a new global flu pandemic; a further 33 percent stated that they would be moderately likely and the remainder indicated a low likelihood (22%).

Perceptions Regarding Immunization

Parents reported various levels of familiarity with childhood vaccines, with half of respondents reporting high familiarity and a similar proportion reporting moderate familiarity. Only six percent of parents feel their knowledge about childhood vaccines is relatively limited.

Nine in ten parents believe childhood vaccines in general are effective and important for their child's health. The childhood vaccines for tetanus/ diphtheria/Hib/pertussis/polio, meningococcal disease, measles/mumps/rubella and pneumococcal disease in particular are seen as highly important. The vaccines

for human papillomavirus (HPV) and chicken pox are deemed highly important by about half of parents. Parents are divided regarding the importance of the seasonal flu vaccine: one-quarter feels this vaccine is highly important, and another quarter feels it is of little or no importance, with the remainder deeming the vaccine moderately important.

Most parents are confident in the safety of childhood vaccines, with 65 per cent of parents rating them as highly safe, 30 percent rating them as moderately safe and very few saying that they are unsafe. By comparison, parents expressed greater caution with regard to the safety of prescription drugs and over the counter medicines. Parents are considerably more concerned with the safety of natural health products, with just one in four rating these as safe. Nonetheless, in response to other lines of inquiry, some safety concerns were expressed with respect to vaccines. In particular, half of parents indicated concern that newer vaccines are not as safe as older vaccines. Four in ten parents are more concerned about the safety of vaccines now than five years ago and a similar proportion agrees that adverse reactions to vaccines don't get enough attention in the media. A third of parents feel that children today receive too many vaccines.

Information and Decision-Making Process

Parents feel that they are well-equipped to make informed decisions when it comes to having their child immunized, as more than eight in ten say they have enough information. Parents generally reported that they had little difficulty in making the decision to immunize their child in the past. That said, one in ten respondents felt that decisions to immunize their child had been difficult, expressing concerns over possible side effects of immunizations and controversial or conflicting evidence about vaccines presented by the media. Parents who do not feel that they have enough information to make informed decisions when it comes to immunizations are most often looking for information that will enable them to assess the risks and side effects associated with the vaccine, as well as the risks associated with the disease it protects against.

Most parents have searched for information regarding childhood vaccines. Sources that are most popular among these parents are Internet-based sources and physicians. Parents who have used the Internet to seek information most commonly used a general Google web search, or consulted various government websites, including Health Canada and provincial or Government of Canada websites generally. Despite the widespread use of the Internet to search for vaccine information, only one quarter of parents see the Internet as their most reliable and trustworthy source of information. Rather, most parents cite physicians as most reliable and trustworthy (68 per cent). This is consistent with the finding that six in ten parents believe there is considerable misinformation about vaccines on the Internet, while only half feel that the Internet is giving parents access to good information to make decisions regarding immunization.

Almost half of parents have had a discussion with a health care professional about a concern related to immunization. Of these, one-third indicated concerns about potential side effects and a further 15 per cent questioned the necessity of getting the vaccine in question. With regard to outcome, 68 per cent of those with concerns ultimately had their child immunized while twenty-three per cent did not. In fact, most

parents surveyed agreed that they usually follow the advice of their child's doctor or nurse and that health care providers clearly explain the risks and benefits of vaccines

Only four per cent of parents in the survey (74 parents) reported adverse reactions to a vaccine. The most frequently reported reactions included fever, tiredness, redness, swelling or hives. Just over half of all Canadian parents are aware that adverse reactions are tracked in Canada, although there is confusion as to how this is done. Thirty-six percent of parents indicated high confidence in the system for tracking these side effects, with six in ten saying they are moderately confident; few parents described themselves as not confident.

Patterns of Awareness, Perceptions and Information Needs

While most parents feel well equipped to make decisions related to immunization of their children, and while most believe that immunization is important, safe, and effective, there is a smaller group of parents, who believes that they do not have enough information, are confused, or generally have doubts about the need, safety and effectiveness of immunization for their children. This is typically more prevalent among some parent segments. In some cases, parents feel less familiar with the issue and less well-equipped to make the decision, expressing concerns about inadequate or inconsistent information. There is also a segment with doubts about the need and effectiveness of vaccines, although they typically do not express confusion or a need for more information about the issue.

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