

## Canadians shun over-the-counter drugs

BY MISTY HARRIS, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE SEPTEMBER 2, 2009 2:01 PM



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**Photograph by:** Kevin Lamarque, Reuters

Canadians' upper lips are among the stiffest in the world when it comes to enduring minor health woes, according to a new global study.

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Analysts for market research firm Nielsen, which conducted the Global Online Consumer Survey, described us as "minimalists" when it comes to self-medication, reporting that "Canadians seem to have a higher tolerance for ailments than the rest of the world."

The recession has only made us more stalwart. One in four Canadians cite the economy for anticipated changes in drug use, with 26 per cent of that group expecting to use OTC

medications less frequently, 13 per cent intending to take less than the recommended dosages, 10 per cent planning to purchase in smaller quantities, and four per cent saying they'll cut out non-prescription meds altogether.

But while tough economic times may give Canadians another excuse for avoiding OTC drugs, they're not the main reason. Just six per cent of Canadians name cost as a barrier to OTC drug use. On a list of factors considered important to consumers when buying non-prescription drugs, price is topped by effectiveness and safety (24 per cent compared to 45 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively).

Laurie Szott-Rogers will take an Aspirin just a few times a year. The Edmonton woman began pursuing more natural therapies — the lichen usnea for a sore throat, or reishi mushrooms to boost her immune system — after a bad experience with an acne medication.

"It did a lot of damage to me and made me realize that sometimes, with some people, with some drugs, there can be effects we're not expecting. I became more cautious," says Szott-Rogers, a teacher. "It's breaking that herd mentality in a way."

Nielsen reports that four in 10 Canadians think that taking medicine can actually be harmful to their health, which some suggest is the result of rising moral panic over drug consumption and the dubious notion of there being a "pill for every ill."

"There's certainly a lot more scrutiny, and a lot more research as well," says Michael Hunt, an Ottawa-based pharmacist. "Seldom does a week go by where we don't see something in the newspaper about the safe use of drugs."

Medicine cabinets, however, are hardly bare. The Canadian Institute for Health Information recently reported that spending on pharmaceuticals has more than doubled in the past decade, with nearly \$30 billion having been shelled out for prescription and non-prescription medications in 2008.

"We're still heavily dependent on drug therapy in the delivery of health in this country," says Hunt, CIHI's manager of pharmaceuticals. "But what's the 'right' number of expenditure? I don't think anyone knows."

Portents of a sea change could be seen as early as 2006, when a national survey commissioned by a drug company revealed nearly 60 per cent of Canadians aged 18 to 29 were more likely to ignore a headache than treat it, while more than half (53 per cent) weren't comfortable using pharmaceuticals at all.

Demographer Neil Howe explained at the time that Generation Y, despite being the most

medicated cohort in history in terms of prescriptions, actually has very limited experience with OTC drugs because of access issues, remarking: "To get one tablet of Aspirin into a classroom practically takes a federal edict."

The Nielsen survey is considered accurate within four percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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