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Chemicals Management and Environmental Health Issues Survey and Focus Groups

SUMMARY

Ce rapport est également disponible en français

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Methodology

EKOS Research Associates conducted a national survey of 2,100 residents of Canada aged 18 and older. The survey was conducted online among members of EKOS' Probit panel, a randomly selected panel of Canadian households in January 2017. The sample included an oversample of parents with children six years of age or younger (n=573). Weighting was applied to the sample to ensure that the total sample of n=2,100 reflects the characteristics of the general public by region, age, gender and parental status. The total sample of n=2,100 carries a margin of error of +/-2.1 percentage points, calculated at a 95 per cent confidence interval. The targeted sample of parents with children six years of age and younger carries a margin of error of 4.1 percentage points at a 95 per cent confidence interval.

In the second component, ten focus groups were held with a subset of respondents from the survey to further discuss and contextualize findings. Two groups were held in English in Halifax and three were held in each of Toronto and Calgary, in addition to two individual in-person interviews in Calgary. Two groups were also held in French in Montreal.

Findings

Perceived Risk

- **Most Canadians feel that their own or their family's health is impacted by common environmental factors in and around their home.** About one-third feel they are impacted a great deal, while another two in five say they are impacted a fair amount.
- **Two-thirds of Canadians feel that household chemicals and pesticides pose a risk to their health or family's health.** Half feel that substances such as oil, turpentine, paint, and paint thinners pose a risk. Roughly two in five expressed concerns over air fresheners and scented candles, building materials and renovation supplies, the lead in applied paint, or improper disposal of pharmaceutical drugs. Focus group participants likewise perceive health risks of household products such as household cleaners, use and storage of pesticides, and various plastics in the home. **Two-thirds of Canadians feel that air quality or mould and humidity pose a risk to their health or family's health.** Just over half feel that water quality poses a risk. Roughly two in five think that carbon monoxide, food safety, or cigarette smoke are a risk to their health. When asked to select the single greatest factor of concern, **one-third of Canadians said they are most concerned about air quality, and nearly as many are concerned about water quality.**
- **About half of Canadians feel that lead, asbestos, and mercury pose a risk to human health.** Two in five indicated that arsenic, bisphenol A/BPA, formaldehyde, or Dioxin/PCB's pose a risk to health. Focus group participants substantiated that they are most concerned about the factors that are unknown or they feel they have less control over (asbestos, mould, prior applications of paint, and radon).

- **About six in ten Canadians are concerned that exposure to chemical substances in their home can potentially lead to breathing problems or cancer.** Two in five are concerned that chemical exposure will result in allergies.

Taking Action

- **Most Canadians (84 per cent) agree that it is possible to take steps to prevent or lower health risks posed by common household products. Three-quarters agree that how consumers use or dispose of common household products is a large part of this risk.** Two-thirds agree that it is possible to test for some chemicals in the home that pose a health risk. However, just half feel that chemicals in common household products pose a significant risk no matter how they are used or disposed of by consumers. Focus group participants perceive that some risks are within their control to mitigate and that informing themselves is a primary action to preventing or lowering health risks.
- Just over three-quarters say it is likely that if they had information about possible health risks around their home, along with steps to take, they would make changes to reduce the risk. Of the one in five who say they would not, the primary reasons put forward by about one in six to one in ten are that the steps would likely be too expensive, they do not feel it is a big enough problem, that the information is often contradictory or confusing, or that they rent their house and can not control the changes. Some focus group participants believe it is their own responsibility to inform themselves; some feel that they are limited by not having enough available time to research information, source “safer” products, are confused or overwhelmed by information.
- Most Canadians are either confident (40 per cent) or moderately confident (41 per cent) that they know what steps to take to prevent or reduce health risks to their family from environmental factors in and around their home. Focus group participants who feel not well enough informed tend to also feel there are factors which pose a risk no matter what they do or are most concerned about factors in the environment.
- In terms of actions taken to mitigate these risks, **three-quarters of Canadians open windows and ensure proper ventilation or maintain a smoke free home.** Over half say they properly dispose of unused or expired pharmaceuticals, read all instructions on product labels, follow those instructions, use protective equipment, or use products with fewer chemicals. Focus group participants also noted preventative measures such as properly storing household products, proper use of household products, and ardent selection of products brought into the home.
- **Almost nine in ten pointed to their health and the health of their family as a primary motivator for taking steps to reduce risks.** Two-thirds said they take action because it is good for the environment. Overwhelmingly, focus group participants cited health and the health of their family, particularly children, as the reasons for taking steps to reduce risk from

environmental factors and household products. Many also said that environmental concerns are a benefit to taking steps.

Looking for Information

- Just over half of Canadians say that they have looked for information on what steps can be taken to prevent or reduce risk from environmental contaminants in and around the home. Of those who have looked for information, most feel that the information found was helpful (44 per cent) or moderately helpful (41 per cent). The vast majority of these respondents has taken steps (40 per cent) or partially taken some steps (48 per cent) to reduce risk as a result of information heard or read. Many focus group participants can find the information they are looking for, but others said that they are not sure where to find good information, or that information is not relevant, or difficult to decipher.
- When asked to identify any barriers that may keep them from taking steps to reduce health risks in the home, **two in five Canadians said that it is too expensive to take these steps.** About one-third indicated that they feel a lack of control to make certain changes, the information is not available when making decisions, or the information is confusing or complicated. Many focus group participants said that cost is a barrier to taking action in some cases. Environmental products tend to have higher prices that add up over time, and renovations that involve remediation are also a significant cost. However, some participants said that many actions require no cost (proper use and storage of household products) or may cost less than traditional household products (using “old fashioned” cleaning remedies).
- **Fewer than one in six say they always look for information about what a product contains before purchasing,** while just over one in three indicated they read product information before purchase most of the time. One-third do this sometimes and fourteen per cent say they almost never read product information.

Information of Interest

- **Respondents showed a keen interest in staying informed on how best to protect their health around the home,** with two-thirds indicating they would like to learn more on the subject.
- In terms of how it relates to protecting their health, **Canadians expressed a strong interest in learning more about household chemicals (65 per cent), pesticides and herbicides (52 per cent) and personal care products (51 per cent).** Two in five would like to hear more about building materials, as well as products that emit fragrances. Focus group participants suggested that there is a clear need for more straightforward, easy to use and relevant information, and that this information needs to be organized and available on a well publicized site so that everyone knows where to access it.
- **Air and water quality topped the list of environmental factors about which Canadians would like to learn more,** selected by 66 per cent and 60 per cent of respondents,

respectively. Half expressed interest in mould and humidity, and two-fifths would be interested in receiving information on wireless devices.

- **Online search engines rank as the most popular medium for obtaining information on household health risks, with three-quarters of respondents selecting it as a key outlet.** Six in ten, meanwhile, indicated that they would consult the Health Canada website. Half would simply check the product label, while four in ten would seek guidance from a health professional.
- **By a wide margin, websites and product labels emerged as the two most popular formats for accessing information on household health risks,** selected by 63 per cent and 54 per cent of respondents, respectively. About one in three expressed a preference for pamphlets and brochures or a product search engine.
- **Three-quarters of respondents expressed a high degree of trust in Health Canada and health care professionals, while seven in ten have faith in not-for-profit health groups.** Just over half, meanwhile, would rate non-profit environmental groups as trustworthy. Respondents are considerably more cautious when it comes to manufacturers, retailers, and building contractors, with as many respondents rating these groups as less trustworthy. Sources that are trusted and reputable carry considerable weight for many focus group participants. Government is considered to be a trusted source according to most focus group participants, followed by health professionals. The use of many sources to corroborate information is also a key approach for some.
- **Results expressed only a moderate level of interest in a mobile app that offers guidance on how to mitigate potential risks from household chemicals.** Two-fifths of respondents said they would be highly interested, although just over one-third expressed little to no interest. One in five said that they would be moderately interested. Similarly, interest expressed by focus group participants in a mobile app that provides product safety information was moderate. Some speculated they would use this occasionally to check on products, typically while shopping, most said that it would be of limited value.

Parents of Children Six or Younger

- **Parents of children six years of age or younger are more concerned than many about the potential risk to health from environmental factors in and around their home.** In particular, they have higher levels of concern for household chemicals, as well as personal care products and unused pharmaceuticals. Air quality and mould are also key concerns, and water quality and wireless devices are bigger concerns for this segment than they are for many others.
- Parents are largely concerned about the impacts on the health of children, along with concerns for risks of cancer and respiratory problems more generally.
- Most parents report taking at least some steps to reduce the risks to health from environmental factors, including opening windows when chemicals are used, maintaining a

smoke-free home, using fewer chemicals and increasing the frequency of cleaning. As with other younger Canadians, however, they are less likely to look for information, read labels and follow instructions, use protective equipment, or properly dispose of unused or expired pharmaceuticals than some others.

- As with other Canadians, six in ten have looked for information on steps they can take to reduce risk, although a sizable proportion have not. While many who have sought information describe it as helpful, some expressed a lack of confidence in the information, or found it to be insufficient, impractical, confusing or contradictory, or hard to find. The most useful information was said to provide descriptions of how to dispose of products safely and useful methods of storing dangerous products.
- When describing limitations of the information or in their own ability to take steps, **expense was given as a key reason, more often cited by parents of young children than reported by others**. Some also said that information is confusing, too technical, or features competing messaging, as well as being hard to find, and time consuming to find and read.
- It is not surprising then that parents expressed a strong interest in having more information, particularly on issues that concern them the most (e.g., air quality, mould, household chemicals). Focus group participants also clearly articulated a desire for sources of clear, relevant, and validated information from trustworthy and unbiased sources.
- **Along with online search engines in general, parents expressed a strong preference for obtaining information from Health Canada and from health professionals**, as two key trusted sources, along with non-profit health groups.
- Although some indicated an interest in a mobile app with relevant information that they could use before and during shopping trips, some others in the survey and in focus groups said that websites and product labels are the way in which they would most like to take in information.

Feedback on Communications Materials

- Focus group participants were presented with a list of six sample calls to action as examples of what a Health Canada public education campaign might target. Participants agreed that having a list of straightforward actions that could reduce the risks to health in and around the home is useful for the public
- Three general concepts of possible approaches for a campaign were also presented.
 - ◇ Concept 1: Care for your home health as you would your own health. Some saw this as a natural extension to caring for your health and the only concept that immediately linked to the home. However, the concept was generally viewed as being complicated in wording and the point not instantly obvious. Some felt that the concepts may be about general house repairs or that the idea that they “are where they live” off-putting when they do not want to be judged by where they live.

- ◇ Concept 2: First Aid Kit for your home. This concept was most positively received as the concept that immediately instilled the idea of a list of actions to take. However, the wording of “first aid” was not supported because a first aid kit already exists in the home and has a specific purpose, and because a first aid kit is a reactive measure when something has gone wrong. Participants generally saw the calls to action as proactive, therefore, not congruent with applying first aid. Phrases such as tool kit or tool box and check lists were seen as better variations of the concept.
- ◇ Concept 3: Your health is in your hands. This concept was favoured the least. The idea of personal responsibility is seen as acceptable; although, empowerment is seen as a tired and overused concept for many or adds undue pressure and guilt. Nearly universally, the superhero reference was received poorly as an overdone concept.

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