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## **EKOS Research Associates Inc.**

# Survey for the Development of the Childhood Vaccination Campaign

### *Summary*

Prepared for:  
**HEALTH CANADA**

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français

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# SUMMARY

In order for vaccination programs to be truly effective in reducing the spread of preventable diseases, such programs require a high level of uptake. Though the vast majority of Canadians are vaccinated against vaccine preventable diseases, there are still individuals across the country who are either under- or un-vaccinated. The information gathered from this survey is intended to inform the direction of an awareness campaign featuring messaging to promote the importance, safety, and effectiveness of vaccines with an overall goal of increasing vaccination rates among children aged 0-6 years in Canada. The primary objective was to understand parents' and expecting parents' current state of awareness, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours with respect to childhood vaccination as well as preferred communications channels.

A national telephone-online hybrid survey was conducted with 1,029 Canadians, including 828 parents of children six or younger who have either shared or the primary responsibility for decision making when it comes to health care. It also includes 201 women who are currently or intending to become pregnant within the next 12 months. The survey was conducted in November with a participation rate of 20 per cent (which is a typical response rate for this kind of survey). No weighting was applied to the sample as no information was available on the target population with regard to gender of parents with health care decision making, or on age. The sample was, however, weighted by region.

## ***Perceptions and Concerns***

### **Trust in recommended childhood vaccinations**

Respondents to the survey were informed that recommended childhood vaccinations include routine vaccines to prevent tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), polio, measles, mumps, rubella, and varicella (chickenpox). They do not include vaccines to prevent influenza (flu) or in specific travel vaccines. Most parents and expecting parents (84 per cent) trust recommended childhood vaccinations. This level of trust is slightly under the reported incidence in a 2015 survey where 89 per cent of parents report that their children's vaccinations were completely up to date<sup>1</sup>. There is a significant proportion, however, with only moderate trust in vaccinations (one in ten) and a further five per cent with limited trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada. Childhood National Immunization Coverage Survey. 2015.

Nearly half of parents and expecting parents said they accept all recommended vaccines and have no doubts or concerns about vaccinating their child. One-third (or one in three) said they accept recommended vaccines, however, they have some minor doubts and concerns about vaccinating their child. Six per cent accept all recommended vaccines but nonetheless have many doubts and concerns. Confirming low trust levels for some, one in ten said they have refused or delayed getting some vaccines for their children.

For most parents and those expecting, concerns about routine childhood vaccines are less apt to be related to effectiveness in preventing potentially deadly diseases, given that nine in ten rate them as effective. Safety is more apt to be a concern since slightly fewer see them as safe, compared with effective, although eight in ten agree they are safe.

In terms of demographic patterns, concentrations of vaccine-hesitant parents are higher than average in British Columbia, and women compared with men. Quebec parents are also more apt to have concerns about safety of vaccines.

### **Vaccination decision making**

Three in four parents have found decisions about vaccinating their child to be relatively easy to make. Over one in ten have found them to be neither easy nor difficult, or outright difficult to make, rising to about four in ten among vaccine-hesitant parents.

One in four parents and expecting parents started thinking about their child's vaccination needs during the pregnancy. One in five started thinking about this issue prior to pregnancy. Three in ten started thinking about vaccinations soon after their child's birth. One in five thought about it at the time when vaccinations were due or over the course of the first check ups.

Most, seven in ten, parents and expecting parents have not experienced a change in their level of concern regarding vaccines over the last year or two. Among those experiencing a change, about equal proportions of just over one in ten say they are either more concerned or less concerned than in previous years. Those who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant are more likely than current parents to say they are more concerned than in previous years. Four in ten parents and expecting parents who reported to have refused or delayed recommended vaccines because of doubts and concerns (also referred to throughout the report as those who are "vaccine-hesitant") also indicated an increase in concern.

### **Trust in remedies for preventing or treating an illness in children**

Trust in a healthy lifestyle as a way to prevent or treat an illness in children rivals trust in vaccines (86 per cent compared with 84 per cent). Antibiotics are a marginally less trusted source (74 per

cent). Just over half trust over-the-counter medications. In contrast, slightly over one-third of parents and expecting parent trust vitamins and supplements. Holistic medicine and homeopathic products garner even less trust as a remedy to treat an illness in children, with only about one in four indicating trust. Trust in antibiotics and over the counter medications is lower among parents who are hesitant about vaccines compared with other parents. This same segment, however has higher than average trust when it comes to holistic medicines and vitamins and supplements.

### **Reasons for Concerns**

Parents and expecting parents with some doubts and concerns about vaccinations pointed to a plethora of reasons for their concerns. Roughly one in four are concerned the vaccines can cause allergic reactions, do not trust the pharmaceutical industry, or feel that vaccines can cause side effects and diseases that they are supposed to prevent. More than one in five are concerned because they believe that vaccines contain toxic ingredients. Between one in six and one in eight feel too many vaccines are offered within a short period of time (or in general), that vaccines have not been tested enough, or they have general concerns about side effects, or do not trust the government in vaccine advice. Ten per cent continue to believe that vaccines may cause autism.

Parents and expecting parents identified a primary question they would like to have answered about vaccines for their child. Although no one predominant question emerged, roughly one in ten said they would like to know about side effects and frequency of side effects, or more information about the vaccine schedule, particularly involving multiple vaccines. Fewer than one in ten would like to have questions answered about the effectiveness or necessity of vaccines.

### **Influencing statements**

Parents and expecting parents collectively recalled various messages about vaccines that stood out and shaped their thinking, although three in five said they did not have any single message stand out. Eight per cent said the simple fact that vaccines prevent disease shaped their decision. Six per cent are influenced by the message that vaccines are for the health of the public. Negative messages about vaccines shaped the thinking of a few, including hearing of dangers or risks of vaccinations, and a reported connection to autism.

Parents and expecting parents who have some doubts and concerns about vaccinations were asked to consider a series of twelve statements in terms of likely influence on vaccination decisions. While differentiation between the statements is only marginal, results point to a cluster of four statements considered more influential to positively influence likelihood to vaccinate, according to roughly two in three respondents. These include “Vaccines give best protection from 14 serious diseases”, “Immunization schedule is designed to protect infants/children”, “No cure for most vaccine preventable diseases”, and “Getting my baby vaccinated protects other children”. About

half of parents and expecting parents with doubts and concerns say they would be influenced by a “Doctor saying ‘I did it for my own family and kids’”, a statement that “Vaccines are very safe”, or “Every pediatric hospital in Canada recommends routine vaccination”. Roughly two in five would be influenced by statements that “Serious reactions are rare”, “Public Health Agency of Canada recommends routine vaccination”, or “Scientific studies show no relationship between vaccines and autism”. One in three said they would be influenced by a statistic such as “97% of parents in Canada vaccinate their children”. Only one in four would be influenced by the statement “Getting vaccines is the right thing to do”.

## ***Information***

### **Sources of health information**

Survey results highlight strong, but not universal reliance on healthcare professionals as a primary source for information related to their health and the health of their children. Nine in ten cited healthcare providers as a primary source of information, although this slips to eight in ten among parents expressing concerns about effectiveness of vaccines. Just over half said they rely on the Internet. Other prominent sources include friends or family members and pharmacists, each relied upon by about one in three.

Those who go online for health-related information use a variety of online resources, although a key source is parenting and pregnancy websites, used by four in ten of those going online for information. One in five, meanwhile, use online medical websites or Web MD, and slightly fewer use the top ranked results from search engines. About one in eight turn to online chat rooms, forums and social media.

Encouragingly, medical sources – particularly healthcare professionals and government health agencies – rank as the most trusted sources of health-related information. While not unanimous, nine in ten parents and expecting parents express a high degree of trust in these sources. The proportion indicating high trust is significantly lower, however, among vaccine-hesitant parents expressing concerns. Not far down the list, three-quarters place a high degree of trust in Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada, although fewer vaccine-hesitant parents viewed them as trusted sources. Trust of non-medical sources is more varied, although one-third family and friends. Trust in information from the media fared the worst.

### **Sources of information on childhood vaccines**

Two in three parents and expecting parents reported that they have looked for information about vaccines, although this is closer to three in four amount those who are vaccine-hesitant. The vast

majority of parents and expecting parents who have searched for information about childhood vaccines began their search well in advance, with almost half initiating their search prior to the birth of their child. Only one in seven waited until it was time to vaccinate.

Once again, the vast majority of parents and expecting parents who looked sought guidance from a healthcare provider (84 per cent). The Internet also ranks as a leading source of information, with roughly two-thirds (64 per cent) saying that they searched online. Three in ten turned to family and friends for advice, and one-quarter relied on books, along with one in six who conferred with a pharmacist. Reliance on family and friends as well as books is significantly higher among vaccine-hesitant parents.

Those who went to the Internet said they relied on a wide array of websites, although most turned to medical resources such as a parenting or pregnancy website (39 per cent), an online medical website (21 per cent), or a Government of Canada website such as Health Canada (12 per cent). Nevertheless, one in ten turned to chat rooms, forums and social media.

### **Adequacy of Information about Vaccines**

Although most parents and expecting parents feel they have enough information to make informed decisions, 16 per cent feel they do not, and this figure rises to four in ten among vaccine-hesitant parents. This is most often because they feel there is too much conflicting information about vaccines, followed by a lack of relevant information, inability to find sources for information or inability to find information from trustworthy sources. Concerns about credibility of sources is more pronounced among vaccine-hesitant parents.

### **Issues of Interest**

Survey results highlight a broad thirst for information about childhood vaccines. Information on the risks of vaccine side effects, suggested vaccination schedules, the severity of vaccine-preventable diseases, and the risks of contracting the actual diseases that childhood vaccines are meant to protect against, top the list according to about nine in ten survey respondents. Eight in ten also expressed interest in learning how vaccines are tested. Only the ingredients found in vaccines are of slightly less interest, although still selected by seven in ten.

### **Preferred Authority for Addressing Concerns**

In terms of sources that parents and expecting parents feel they would turn to if they had concerns about vaccinating their children, healthcare professionals are again cited as by far the most relied upon, although not universal, source of information. Eight in ten indicated they would turn to a

healthcare provider. One-quarter would consult a family member, and another one in ten would confer with another parent or the government.

The contract value for the POR project is \$96,354.54 (including HST).

Supplier Name: EKOS Research Associates

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To obtain more information on this study, please e-mail: [por-rop@hc-sc.gc.ca](mailto:por-rop@hc-sc.gc.ca)



## POLITICAL NEUTRALITY CERTIFICATION

This certification is to be submitted with the final report submitted to the Project Authority.

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of EKOS Research Associates Inc. that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research.

Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

**Signed by:** Susan Galley (Vice President)