Santé Canada Health Canada

Canadians' Perspectives on Safety Information Disclosure for Consumer Chemical Products

Executive Summary

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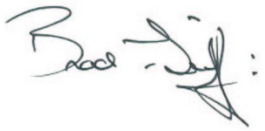

Brad Griffin, President
Ipsos Public Affairs
Signed on February 8, 2024

This public opinion research report presents the results of an online survey conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs on behalf of Health Canada. The research study was conducted with n=3,006 Canadians in December 2023.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre: Perspective des Canadiens sur la divulgation des renseignements en matière de sécurité des produits chimiques de consommation.

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

A wide variety of consumer chemical products such as household cleaning products, adhesives, and lubricants are available to the Canadian public. The *Consumer Chemicals and Containers Regulations, 2001* (CCCR, 2001 or Regulations) under the *Canada Consumer Product Safety Act* (CCPSA) help to protect people in Canada from certain acute human health and physical hazards associated with consumer chemical products, through prohibitions and restrictions on dangerous consumer chemical products, safety information disclosure in the form of labelling requirements, and container requirements like child-resistant containers. The labelling requirements of the CCCR, 2001 include hazard symbols, signal words (e.g., "DANGER") and hazard statements (e.g., "POISON") that help alert users to hazards. In addition, there are labelling requirements for safe use and first aid instructions, and a list of hazardous ingredients contained in the product. The acute human health and physical hazards that are currently addressed by the CCCR, 2001 are:

- acute toxicity (lethal or serious but non-lethal effects);
- corrosivity (chemical burns and eye damage);
- flammability (chemicals that catch fire);
- pressurized containers (containers that may explode if heated or punctured); and,
- quick skin-bonding adhesives (adhesives that bond skin instantly or nearly instantly).

Many substances contained in consumer chemical products are linked to human health hazards of concern (HHHOCs), including those that may cause an adverse health effect resulting from long term or intermediate exposure. However, the CCCR, 2001 do not include requirements that specifically help mitigate the risks for the following HHHOCs:

- carcinogenicity (induction of cancer);
- germ cell mutagenicity (heritable gene mutations);
- reproductive toxicity (adverse effects on sexual function, fertility, or developmental toxicity in offspring);
- specific target organ toxicity (adverse effects on target organs after single or repeated exposure); and
- respiratory or skin sensitization (allergic reactions or hypersensitivity).

To help protect people in Canada from HHHOCs found in consumer chemical products, Health Canada is developing a regulatory proposal for new health and safety requirements under the CCPSA. This objective may be achieved by establishing hazard classification criteria, labelling requirements, and additional protections such as prohibitions, restrictions, or child-resistant container requirements. In this way, users of consumer chemical products would be alerted to HHHOCs in consumer chemical products where there is a risk of injury or adverse health effect and would be provided with necessary precautionary statements, such as instructions for safe use and first aid.

The Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS) is a United Nations (UN) standard intended to harmonize the hazard classification and hazard communication of chemicals globally, through labelling and safety data sheets. Like the CCCR, 2001, for the consumer sector it is expected that providing safety information to users through labeling will be the primary focus of GHS application. To help protect the health and safety of workers, the GHS

has been adopted for chemicals used, handled, and stored in workplaces in Canada, under the Hazardous Products Act and its regulations. The United States has also implemented the GHS in the workplace through the revised Hazard Communication Standard in 2012. In addition, the GHS has been adopted for the workplace and the consumer sector by numerous jurisdictions around the world including the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK), and New Zealand.

Research Objectives

Safety information is more likely to be read and followed when it is disclosed in a manner that is preferred and can be easily understood by people in Canada. Effective communication of safety information may contribute to a reduction in rates of injury or illness since this information would help to improve safe handling, use and storage of consumer chemical products. The primary objective of this research is to better understand people in Canada's use of current safety information disclosed on consumer chemical products and to compare viewpoints on current and possible future requirements related to safety information disclosure. This understanding will help to inform Health Canada's decisions during the regulatory development process.

The goals of the research include:

- determining current awareness and understanding of certain chemical product hazard symbols and hazard statements;
- understanding the level of importance to the public of disclosing health effects resulting from long term or repeated exposures versus acute health and physical hazards;
- identifying preferred hazard symbols, signal words, and precautionary statements from different hazard communication systems including the CCCR, 2001 and the GHS; and,
- identifying preferred format of label elements (i.e., location on the container, order, etc.).

Overview of Methodology

A 16-minute online survey was conducted among a nationwide sample of Canadian adults between December 8-15, 2023. In total, n=3,006 Canadians completed the survey, including a sample boost of n=200 individuals who identify as Indigenous Peoples of Canada. The sample source was a non-probability online panel. Ipsos partnered with Canadian Viewpoint Inc. as a panel-based resource, (which is a diversely sourced and actively maintained panel of approximately 300,000 active panelists of Canadian adults). The survey was offered in both official languages and consisted of a series of closed-ended and open-ended questions designed in consultation with the Health Canada Project Authority.

The data were weighted to the Canadian population data by region, gender, and age. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error and measurement error. To ensure the data from the survey provides reliable information on the full spectrum of Canadians, a Sex- and Gender-Based Analysis Plus (SGBA+) framework was incorporated into the survey design and analysis.

Summary of Key Findings

The survey found a large majority of Canadians use household cleaning chemicals and detergents frequently, at least once per week. Weekly usage of other types of household chemicals is less common. One-quarter of Canadians surveyed

use chemicals such as those associated with hobbies and crafts monthly; about the same proportion report using automotive chemicals monthly. Fortunately, many Canadians surveyed report reading and following safety instructions on household chemicals before using them. However, three in ten frequently do not read these instructions before using them.

The data suggests that frequent users of these chemicals are the least diligent about reading and following the instructions on household chemicals prior to using them. These frequent users skew younger, rather than older. Survey respondents aged 18-24 were more likely than those older than them to report using household chemicals and less likely to indicate they read and follow safety instructions on household chemicals prior to using them.

The survey found that most Canadians think hazard symbols are useful in alerting them about the hazards that can cause injury or death, and most Canadians have some knowledge of the hazard symbols surveyed. Most Canadians correctly identified one of the two hazard symbols, from the CCCR, 2001 or the GHS, representing a product that will cause your skin to burn or cause eye damage (61% for the CCHR and 57% for the GHS), but only three in ten were able to correctly identify both hazard symbols. Only two in ten of those surveyed could correctly identify the GHS exclamation symbol as indicating less serious health effects may occur upon exposure (e.g., skin or eye irritation, allergic reactions). Only four in ten correctly identified the GHS health hazard symbol indicating that health effects such as cancer may occur upon exposure.

When it comes to hazard symbols that Canadians feel better alert them to the hazard, there is a reasonably good degree of consensus. By a margin of three-to-one, Canadians surveyed chose the explosive symbol from the CCCR, 2001 over the gas cylinder symbol from the GHS as the symbol that better alerted a user that a gas cylinder can explode if it is heated or punctured. However, opinions were divided when choosing which symbol would better alert that a household chemical is corrosive, i.e., the one from the CCCR, 2001 or the one from the GHS.

Three-quarters of Canadians surveyed agreed that safety information on chemicals/products containing chemicals is adequate to protect their health and safety. However, when asked to choose the wording of hazard statements that would be most effective to them, there were often mixed opinions across those surveyed. Two-thirds of survey respondents opted for the hazard statement “extremely flammable liquid and vapour” as best in alerting users that a household chemical can easily catch fire if ignited with a flame or spark. A similar percentage chose the hazard statement “fatal if swallowed” as the best to alert users that a household chemical can cause death if swallowed. The hazard statement “may cause allergy or asthma symptoms or breathing difficulties if inhaled” was chosen as the best to alert users that a household chemical may cause an allergic reaction upon inhalation. Only a slim majority felt that the hazard statement “may cause reproduction harm or birth defects” best alerts users that a household chemical may harm the ability to reproduce.

When asked about the importance of the nature of the safety information disclosed on household chemical products, Canadians ranked the information about the safe handling, use, and storage of the product and information about the harmful chemical ingredients contained in the product as the most important. The least important was information about the first aid treatment upon exposure to the product and information about long term hazards. Of three cleaning labels presented to Canadians surveyed, the labels that were seen as most effective in prompting them to read detailed safety information, handle the product carefully or store the product in a safe place are the hybrid label of the CCCR, 2001 and the GHS (42%) or the full GHS label (37%).

Canadians surveyed would find it useful if the safety information displayed on a household chemical product was also available on the company's website. Majorities across all demographic and regional subgroups find this would be useful. In addition to the safety information provided on the label for a poisonous household chemical, Canadians surveyed were most likely to support the addition of a national toll-free phone number for poison centres (1-844-POISON-X) (82%) or instructions on how to dispose a product safely (77%). Far fewer want to see concentration values for hazardous ingredients (40%).