

# KAISER PUBLIC OPINION SPOTLIGHT

*Kaiser Public Opinion Spotlights provide in-depth analysis of public opinion on a variety of health care and health policy topics. Each Spotlight uses public opinion data from Kaiser surveys and other sources to examine current views and trends. All Spotlights available at [www.kff.org/spotlight](http://www.kff.org/spotlight)*

*Updated: April 2008*

*This Kaiser Public Opinion Spotlight focuses on the public's and physicians' views of direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising. A separate Spotlight focusing on the public's views and experiences with prescription drugs in general, and their opinions of the pharmaceutical industry is available [here](#).*

## **Public and Physician Views of Direct-to-Consumer Prescription Drug Advertising**

Prescription drugs play a role in the daily lives of more than half of all Americans, and most people agree that these medications have had a positive impact on their life and the lives of Americans in general. However, paying for the medications they need is a problem for many adults in this country; four in ten report at least one problem affording prescription drugs (either that it is a serious problem for their family to pay for drugs they need, or that they have not filled a prescription or skipped doses because of cost). [For more details on the public's views and experiences with prescription drugs in general, see [here](#).]

Given the widespread use of prescription drugs in the U.S., and the burden that paying for these drugs presents for many Americans, there has been much public debate about the role of advertising in the use and cost of prescription drugs. This Spotlight uses public opinion data to examine the public's familiarity with prescription drug advertising, their general opinions of these ads, and their reported experiences talking with doctors about drugs they saw advertised. It also uses data from a survey of physicians to explore these topics from the doctors' point of view.

Prescription drug advertisements have become widespread in American media, and in 2008, 91% of adults report having seen or heard advertisements for prescription drugs. When it comes to general opinions about these ads, more people view them as mainly positive than as negative. Just over half (53%) of the public says prescription drug advertising is mostly a good thing, while 40% say it is mostly a bad thing. Two-thirds (67%) of the public agrees that prescription drug advertisements educate people about available treatments and encourage them to get help for medical conditions they might not have been aware of.

However, the public has concerns about drug advertisements, and views are mixed about how well these ads present specific information about the medicines they advertise. While majorities say drug ads do an excellent or good job explaining the potential benefits of a medication and what condition it is designed to treat, more than half (53%) say ads do only a "fair" or "poor" job explaining the potential side effects of the medication. The public is also concerned about the cost of prescription drug ads, and the impact of this cost on drug prices overall. Six in ten say pharmaceutical companies spend too much money advertising to patients, and more than three-quarters (77%) agree that the cost of such advertising makes prescription drugs too expensive.

As a result of seeing a prescription drug advertisement, a third (32%) of adults say they have talked with their doctor about the drug they saw advertised. In all, four in five (82%)

of those who spoke with their doctor after seeing a drug advertisement say their doctor gave them a prescription, either for the drug they asked about (44% of those who asked) or for another prescription drug (54%).

Doctors themselves also report inquiries from patients about drugs they saw advertised; eight in ten physicians say that patients ask them about specific diseases or treatments they heard about from prescription drug ads at least “sometimes,” including nearly three in ten (28%) who say they “frequently” get such inquiries from patients. A plurality (42%) of physicians say that these inquiries have a positive impact on their interactions with patients, while about one in five (21%) say they have a negative impact, and about a third (35%) say they have no effect.

Majorities of doctors say that, when patients ask them about prescription drugs they heard about from ads or other sources, they at least “sometimes” recommend a different prescription drug (76%) or give the patient a prescription for the drug they asked about (57%); however, fewer physicians say they “frequently” recommend another prescription (14%) or give the patient the prescription they asked about (5%).

**Click on a title below to jump to that section of the Spotlight:**

[Reported Exposure to Prescription Drug Advertisements](#)

[Overall Views of Prescription Drug Advertising](#)

[Views of Ads for Drugs to Treat Mental Health Conditions](#)

[Views of Information Provided by Prescription Drug Ads](#)

[Ads as a Source of Information About Prescription Drugs](#)

[Concerns About Prescription Drug Ads](#)

[Views of Drug Company Spending on Advertising and Marketing](#)

[Trust In Prescription Drug Ads](#)

[Attitudes About Government Regulation Of Prescription Drug Advertising](#)

[Talking To Doctors As Result Of Seeing Prescription Drug Ads](#)

[Physicians’ General Views of Direct-to-Consumer Prescription Drug Ads](#)

[Physicians’ Reports of Patients’ Inquiries Prompted by Drug Ads](#)

[Physicians’ Opinions of Patient Inquiries from Ads and Other Sources](#)

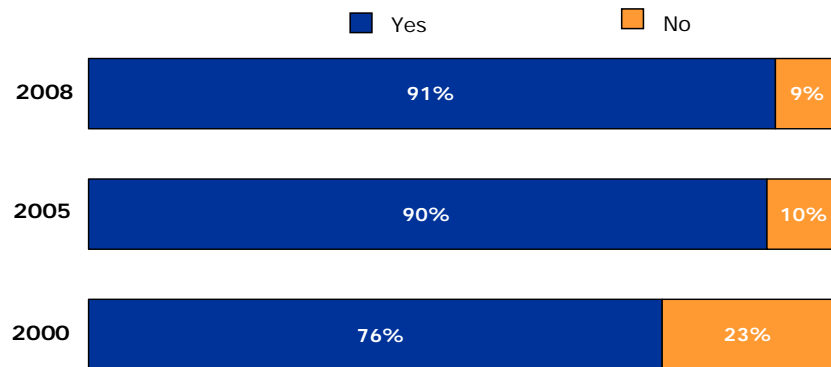
[Physicians’ Reported Actions When Patients Inquire About Prescription Drugs](#)

## **Reported Exposure to Prescription Drug Advertisements**

In 2008, nearly all adults (91%) say they have seen or heard advertisements for prescription medications. This share has increased since 2000 when just over three-quarters (76%) said they had seen drug ads.

### **Reported Exposure to Prescription Drug Advertisements**

Have you seen or heard any advertisements for prescription drugs?



Sources: 2008: USA Today/KFF/HSPH *The Public on Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23, 2008

2005: Kaiser Family Foundation *Health Poll Report Survey*, Feb. 3-6, 2005

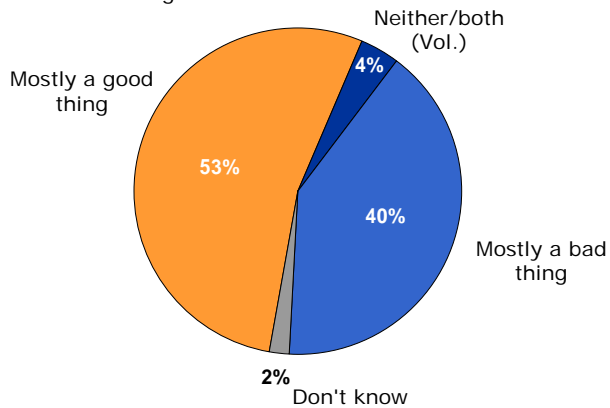
2000: Kaiser/AHRQ *Update on the Role of Quality Information Survey*, Jul. 31-Oct 9, 2000

## Overall Views of Prescription Drug Advertising

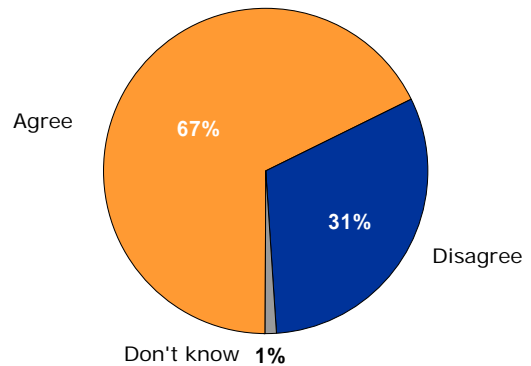
More people view prescription drug ads as mainly positive than as negative. Just over half (53%) of the public says prescription drug advertising is mostly a good thing, while 40% say it is mostly a bad thing. In addition, two-thirds (67%) of people agree that prescription drug advertisements educate people about available treatments and encourage them to get help for medical conditions they might not have been aware of.

### **Rx Drug Advertising Viewed Mostly Positively**

On balance, do you think prescription drug advertising is mostly a good thing, or mostly a bad thing?



Do you agree or disagree with this statement: Prescription drug ads educate people about available treatments and encourage them to get help for medical conditions they might not have been aware of



Source: USA Today/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health: *The Public On Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23, 2008

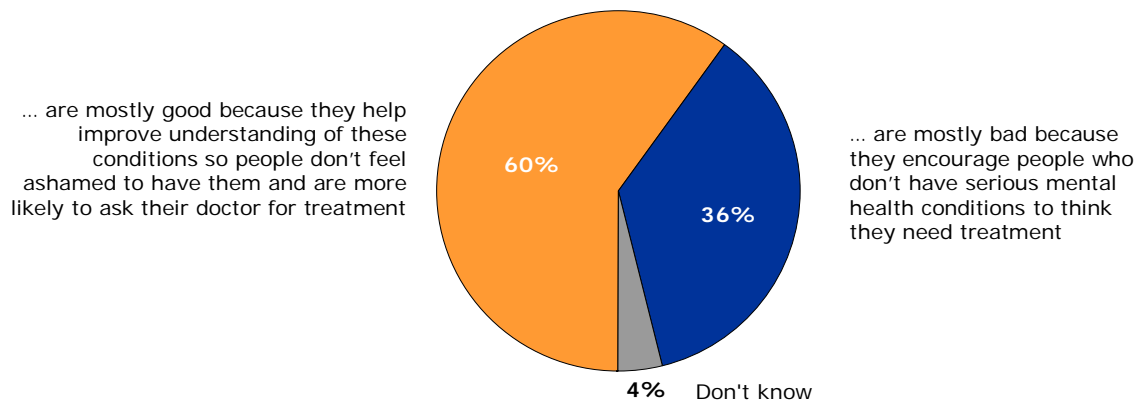
## Views of Ads for Drugs to Treat Mental Health Conditions

The public is also mostly favorable towards advertisements for prescription drugs to treat mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. Six in ten (60%) think such ads are mostly good because they improve understanding of these conditions and encourage people to seek treatment, while just over a third (36%) think these ads are mostly bad because they encourage people without serious mental health conditions to think they need treatment.

### Perception of Drug Ads for Mental Health Conditions

Which comes closer to your view:

Advertisements for prescription drugs to treat mental health conditions like depression and anxiety...?



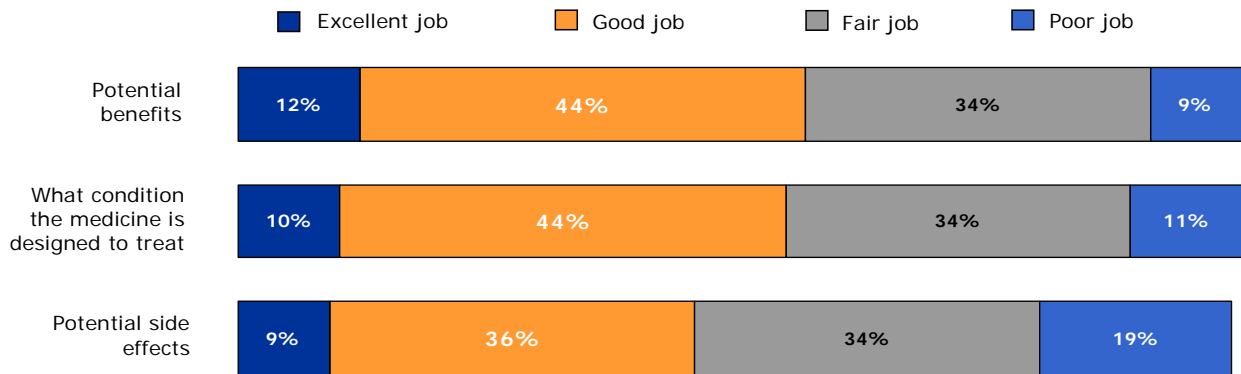
Source: USA Today/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health: *The Public On Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23, 2008

## Views of Information Provided by Prescription Drug Ads

Views are mixed on how well prescription drug ads present specific information about the drugs they advertise. More than half the public says ads do an “excellent” or “good” job explaining the potential benefits of the drug (56%) and the condition the drug is designed to treat (54%). However, a majority (53%) say ads do only a “fair” or “poor” job explaining potential side effects of the medication.

### Views of Information Provided by Prescription Drug Ads

We'd like you to rate the job these advertisements for prescription medicines do in telling you about each of the following...\*



\*Don't know responses not shown

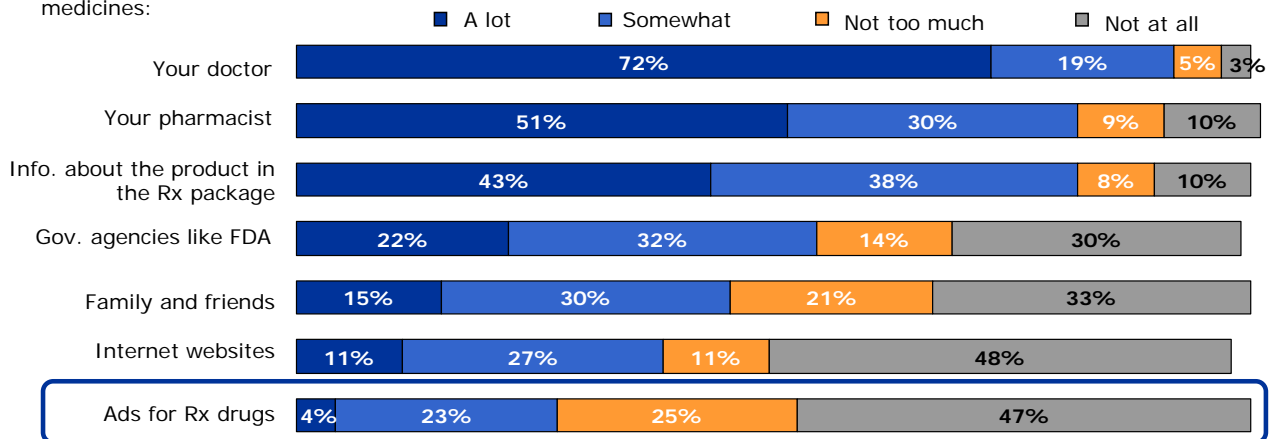
Source: USA Today/KFF/HSPH, *The Public on Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23, 2008

## Ads as a Source of Information About Prescription Drugs

In addition to having mixed views on how well drug ads present different types of information, advertisements rank at the bottom of the list of sources people rely on for information about prescription medications. Just over a quarter (27%) of adults say they rely on drug advertisements “a lot” or “somewhat” to provide accurate information about prescription drugs, ranking lowest on the list of seven sources asked about in a 2008 survey. Ranking highest on the list are doctors (91% say they rely on them at least “somewhat”), pharmacists (81%), and information about the product included in the manufacturer’s packaging (81%).

### Ads as a Source of Information About Prescription Drugs

Please tell me how much you rely on each of the following sources to provide accurate information about prescription medicines:



Note: “Don’t know” responses not shown

Source: USA Today/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health: *The Public On Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23, 2008

## **Concerns About Prescription Drug Ads**

While overall views of prescription drug advertising tilt positive, the public does express concerns about these ads, particularly regarding their impact on the cost of drugs. More than three-quarters (77%) of the public agrees that the cost of advertising makes prescription drugs too expensive, and four in ten (41%) say this bothers them “a lot.” While about two-thirds say there are too many prescription drug ads on television (68%) and that ads encourage people to take medications they don’t need (66%), fewer say they are bothered “a lot” by either of these issues (27% and 34%, respectively). Nearly half the public (46%) thinks that many prescription drug ads are too sexually explicit, but just one in five (20%) say this bothers them a lot.

Negative views about the impact of advertising on drug prices may be driven, at least in part, by people’s real-world difficulties paying for prescription drugs. In 2008, four in ten adults reported at least one problem affording prescription drugs – either that it is a serious problem for their family to pay for drugs they need, or that they have not filled a prescription or skipped doses because of cost. [For more details, see [here](#).]

## **Concerns About Prescription Drug Ads**

<i>Negatives of prescription drug ads</i>	% who agree with each statement	% who say each bothers them “a lot”
The cost of ads makes Rx drugs too expensive	<b>77%</b>	<b>41%</b>
Ads for Rx drugs encourage people to take medicine they don’t need	<b>66%</b>	<b>34%</b>
There are too many Rx drug ads on television	<b>68%</b>	<b>27%</b>
Many Rx drug ads are too sexually explicit	<b>46%</b>	<b>20%</b>

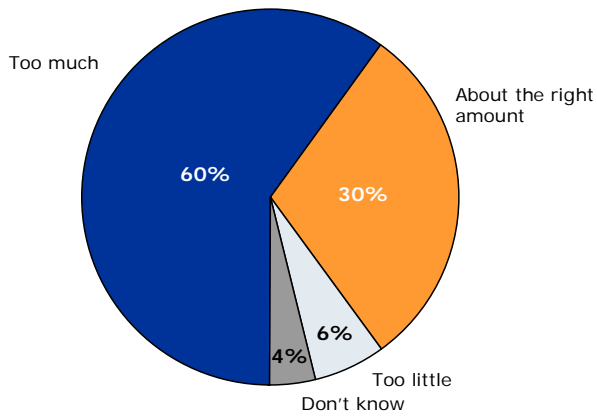
Source: USA Today/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health: *The Public On Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23, 2008

## Views of Drug Company Spending on Advertising and Marketing

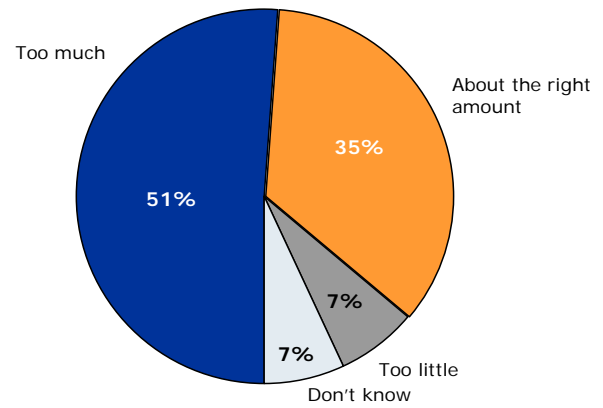
In addition to expressing concern that the cost of advertising makes prescription drugs too expensive, six in ten adults think that pharmaceutical companies spend too much money advertising to patients, while three in ten say these companies spend about the right amount and just 6 percent say they spend too little. When it comes to the amount of money drug companies spend marketing their products to doctors, about half (51%) say they spend too much, while about a third (35%) say they spend about the right amount and just 7 percent say too little.

### Views of Drug Company Spending on Advertising and Marketing

Do you think pharmaceutical companies spend too much, too little or about the right amount of money on advertising to patients?



Do you think pharmaceutical companies spend too much, too little or about the right amount of money on marketing their products to doctors?



Source: USA Today/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health, *The Public on Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23 2008

## Trust In Prescription Drug Ads

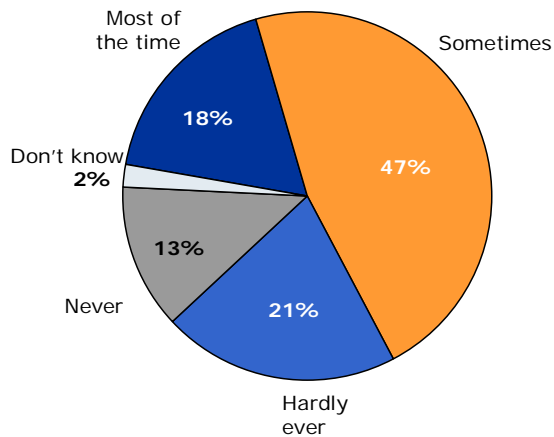
In 2005, fewer than two in ten adults (18%) said they can trust what pharmaceutical companies have to say in their advertisements “most of the time” and almost half (47%) said they can trust drug company ads “sometimes”. One third (34%) said they can “hardly ever” or “never” trust these ads.

Compared with other industries and groups, the share of the public who say they can trust pharmaceutical companies’ ads “most of the time” (18%) is about the same as for health insurance companies (17%) and HMOs (16%), but higher than the share who say they can trust lawyers’ (11%) and politicians’ (6%) ads “most of the time”. Larger shares say they can trust what doctors (45%) and hospitals (37%) say in their advertisements “most of the time”.

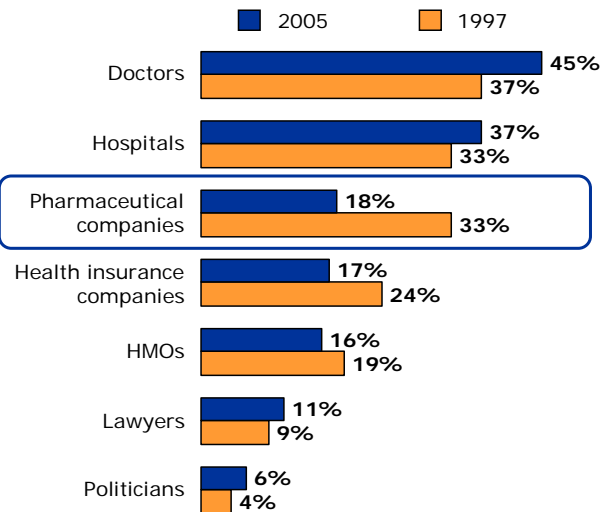
The percent of adults who say they can trust what drug companies say in their ads most of the time decreased by almost half between 1997 and 2005 (from 33% to 18%). During this time period, trust also decreased slightly for advertisements by health insurance companies (from 24% in 1997 to 17% in 2005), and increased somewhat for doctors’ advertisements (from 37% in 1997 to 45% in 2005).

### Trust In Prescription Drug Ads

How often do you think you can trust what pharmaceutical companies have to say in their advertisements? (Feb 2005)



Percent who say they can trust what the following groups have to say in their advertisements “most of the time”...



Sources: 2005: Kaiser Family Foundation *Health Poll Report Survey*, Feb. 3-6, 2005

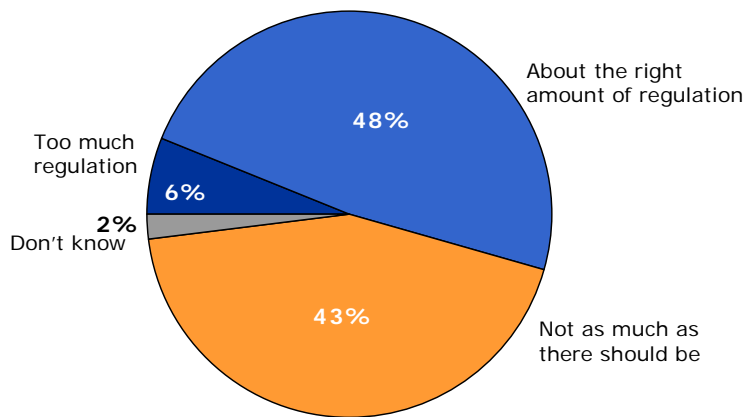
1997: Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health *Views on Managed Care Survey*, Aug. 22-Sep. 23, 1997

## **Attitudes About Government Regulation Of Prescription Drug Advertising**

In addition to having mixed views about prescription drug ads as a source of information, the public is split when it comes to the amount of government regulation aimed at making sure statements in these ads are not misleading. A plurality (48%) feels that there is about the right amount of regulation in this area, while nearly as many (43%) say there is not as much regulation as there should be, and just 6 percent say there is too much government regulation of prescription drug ads.

### **Attitudes About Government Regulation Of Prescription Drug Advertising**

Is there currently too much government regulation, not as much as there should be, or about the right amount of regulation making sure that statements about benefits and side effects made in ads for prescription drugs are not misleading?



Source: USA Today/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health, *The Public on Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23 2008

## Talking To Doctors As Result Of Seeing Prescription Drug Ads

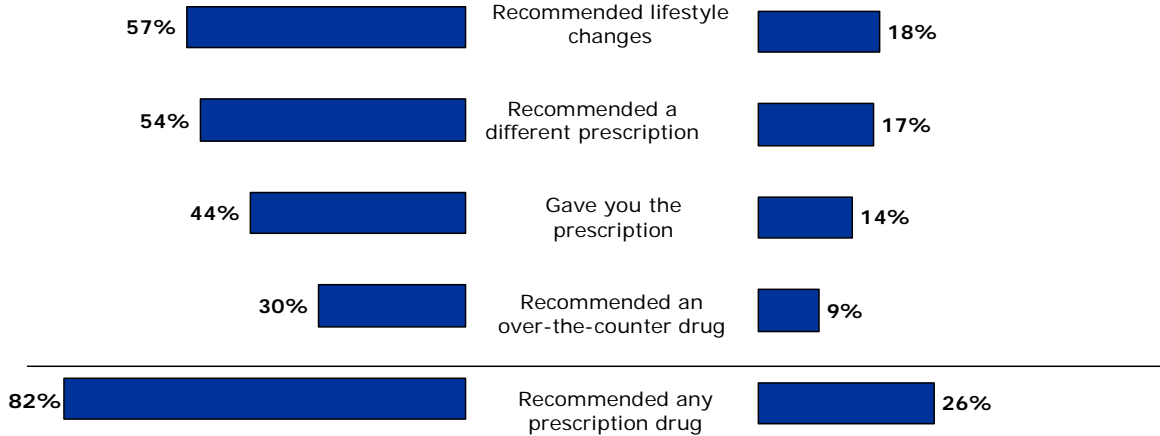
Nearly one-third (32%) of adults say they have talked to a doctor about a specific prescription medication they saw in an advertisement.

More than eight in ten (82%) of those who talked to a doctor about a drug they saw advertised (or 26% of all adults) say the doctor gave them a prescription as a result, either for the drug they asked about (44% of those who asked) or another prescription drug (54%). More than half (57%) of those who talked to a doctor after seeing an ad said their doctor recommended lifestyle or behavior changes, while three in ten said the doctor recommended an over-the-counter drug.

### Outcome Of Talking To Doctor As Result Of Ads

Among the 32% who have talked to a doctor as a result of seeing an Rx drug ad: Percent who said the doctor did one or more of the following...

Percent of total population who talked to a doctor as a result of seeing an Rx drug ad and said the doctor did one or more of the following...



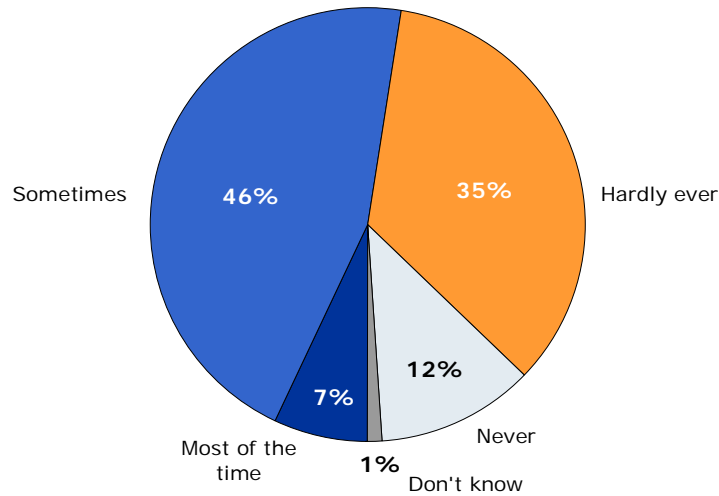
Source: USA Today/KFF/HSPH, *The Public on Prescription Drugs and Pharmaceutical Companies*, Jan. 3-23, 2008

### **Physicians' General Views of Direct-to-Consumer Prescription Drug Ads**

Like the public, physicians are somewhat split when it comes to the usefulness of prescription drug ads. In a 2006 survey of office-based physicians involved in direct patient care with adults, just over half (53%) of doctors said that drug company advertisements provide useful information for patients "most of the time" or "sometimes," while nearly as many (47%) said these ads "hardly ever" or "never" provide useful information for patients.

### **Physicians' General Views of Direct-to-Consumer Prescription Drug Ads**

Do you think advertisements by pharmaceutical or drug companies provide useful information for patients most of the time, sometimes, hardly ever, or never?



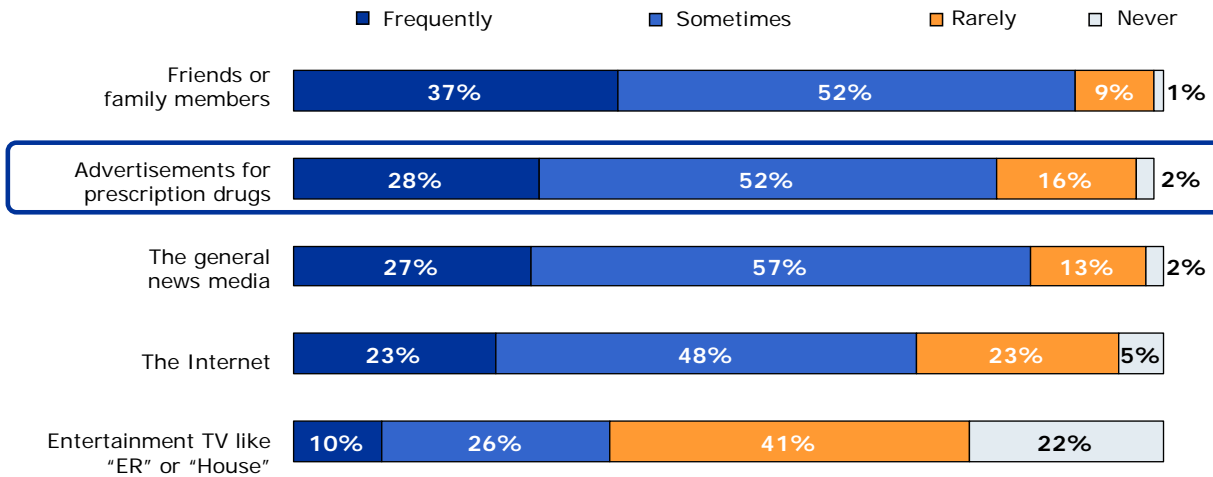
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation *National Survey of Physicians*, Apr. 25-Jul. 8, 2006

## Physicians' Reports of Patients' Inquiries Prompted by Drug Ads

Eight in ten physicians (80%) say that patients ask them about specific diseases or treatments they heard about from advertisements for prescription drugs at least "sometimes," including nearly three in ten (28%) who say they "frequently" get such inquiries from patients. Large shares of physicians also say that patients frequently or sometimes ask them about diseases or treatments they heard about from friends or family members (89%), the general news media (84%), and the Internet (71%), while fewer say patients ask them about treatments they heard about from entertainment TV shows (36%).

### Physicians' Reports of Patients Inquiries Prompted by Drug Ads

How often do patients talk with you about specific diseases or treatments they heard about from...



\*Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

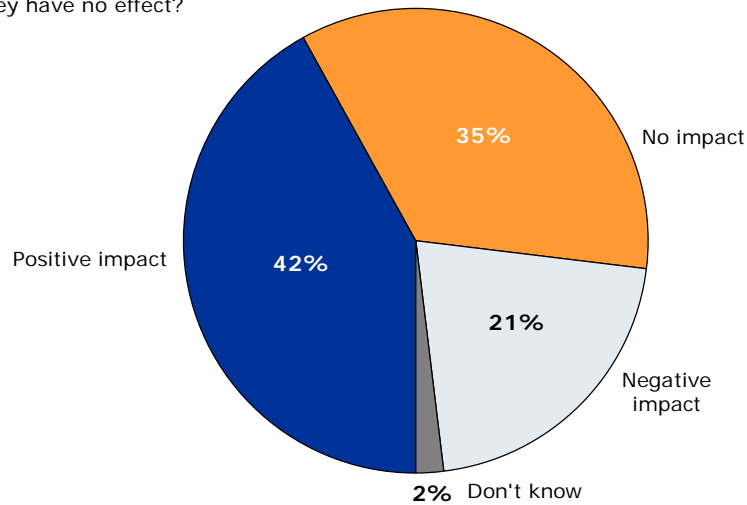
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation *National Survey of Physicians*, Apr. 25-Jul. 8, 2006

## Physicians' Opinions of Patient Inquiries from Ads and Other Sources

A plurality (42%) of physicians say that when patients ask them about specific diseases or treatments they heard about from prescription drug ads or other sources, these inquiries have a positive impact on their interactions with patients. About a third (35%) say these inquiries have no effect on their interactions with patients, while about one in five (21%) say they have a negative impact.

### Physicians' Opinions of Patient Inquiries from Ads and Other Sources

Overall, do you think these inquiries from patients have a positive or negative impact on your interactions with patients, or do they have no effect?



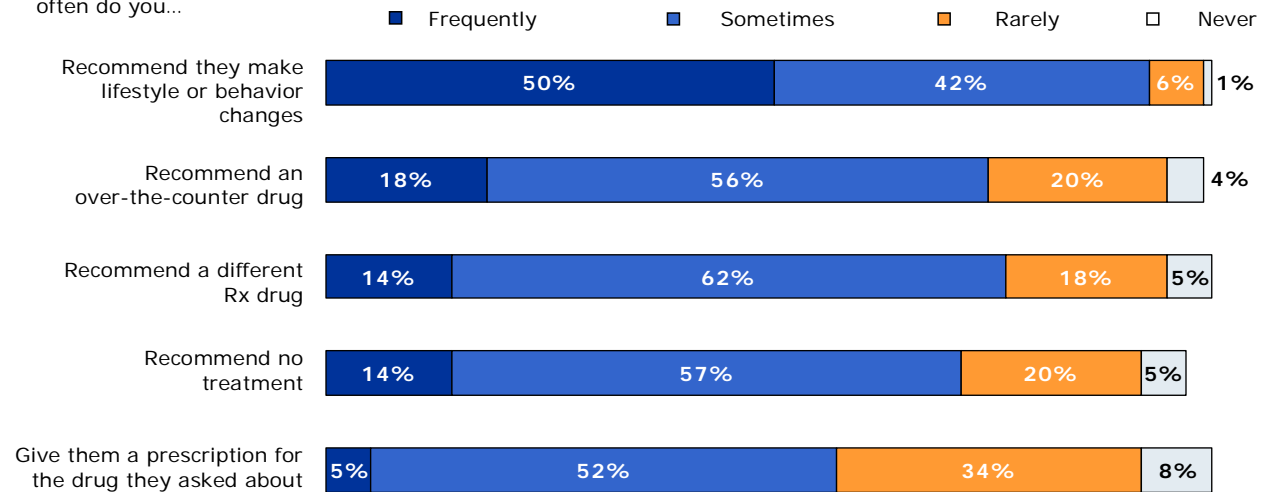
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation *National Survey of Physicians*, Apr. 25-Jul. 8, 2006

## Physicians' Reported Actions When Patients Inquire About Prescription Drugs

When asked what actions they usually take when patients ask them about treatments they heard about from prescription drug ads or other sources, the most common response given by doctors is recommending lifestyle or behavior changes; half of doctors say they do this "frequently" when they get such inquiries from patients, and another 42% say they do this "sometimes." Doctors are less likely to say they frequently recommend an over-the-counter drug (18%), recommend a different prescription drug (14%), recommend no treatment (14%), or give the patient a prescription for the drug they asked about (5%). However, a majority of doctors say they at least sometimes recommend a different prescription drug (76%) or give the patient a prescription for the drug they asked about (57%).

### Physicians' Reported Actions When Patients Inquire About Prescription Drugs

When a patient talks to you about a specific treatment they heard about from the media or other sources, how often do you...



\*Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation *National Survey of Physicians*, Apr. 25-Jul. 8, 2006