



HARVARD  
School of Public Health

**Summary & Chartpack**

NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health

# **Children's OTC Cold Medicines: The Public, and Parents, Weigh In**

**December 2007**

---

## Summary

As we enter the thick of cold and flu season, roughly one third of parents of young children report that they have at least temporarily stopped using children's over-the-counter cold and cough medicines in the wake of recent discussions among a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory panel, the media and the industry regarding their safety and effectiveness, according to a new NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health survey. Reflecting the lack of formal consensus on the issue among government and outside experts, the survey suggests that parents are divided and uncertain when it comes to deciding whether to use the medicines going forward.

Attention to recent news about the issue is high: more than eight in ten parents of young children said they had heard at least something about the safety and effectiveness discussions, and more than half have talked to someone about them. And there is a good deal of confusion: Overall, just over a third of all parents with a child under age 6 say that they are confused about whether over-the-counter cough and cold remedies are safe and effective for their own children's use, with roughly six in ten saying they feel they understand the issue.

In October, an FDA advisory panel recommended that children under the age of 6 not be given over-the-counter cough and cold medicines. The panel was particularly unified in recommending this action for children under age 2. Earlier in October, major manufacturers of over-the-counter cough and cold products for infants voluntarily removed their products from the market.

Despite the recent publicity, most parents cast a cautious vote of confidence in the safety and effectiveness of these products. While no more than one in four would say these products are very safe or effective, a majority of parents of young children (64 percent) believe that over-the-counter cold remedies are at least somewhat safe for use in children under age two, and a larger majority (81 percent) see them as at least somewhat safe for use in children aged two to five. Solid majorities also see them as at least somewhat effective in both helping relieve cold symptoms and in helping children get a good night's sleep.

In general, however, about a third of parents with young children say their views about over-the-counter cough and cold medicines have become more negative over recent years, while the majority (55 percent) say their views haven't changed, and 9 percent say their views have become more positive.

Going forward, 16 percent of those with children under age 2 say they will stop using the products, while 20 percent say they will continue. Among those with children aged 2 to under 6, 15 percent say they will stop and 30 percent say they will continue. The rest of the parents in each group are either unsure about what to do, have never used the products, or have not heard anything about the recent discussions.

Asked about children's over-the-counter medicines more generally, a narrow majority (53 percent) of parents with young children said they did not think pharmaceutical companies did enough testing to ensure that these drugs were safe and effective. At the same time, most parents (71 percent) believe that these drugs are tested at least as thoroughly as those targeted at adults.

The survey suggests many parents have relied on over-the-counter cold and cough medicines to help them get through the severe colds that make kids miserable and keep both children and parents up at night. Just over half (56 percent) of those parents with at least one child under age 2 reported having used an over-the-counter cold or cough medicine for their child in that age group. Even more of those (79 percent) with slightly older children – aged two to five – had used the product for a child in that age category. Many also reported that their physicians had recommended these medicines, including 45 percent of parents with children in the first age group, and 64 percent of parents in the second.

The large majority of parents who have used the medicines for their younger children (78 percent) say a major reason is to relieve their child's cold symptoms. About a third say that one major reason they use the products is to help their child sleep better, and one in ten say it is so they as a parent are able to get some sleep.

Parents have reacted to recent concerns about the safety of these medicines by taking a number of steps. More than half (56 percent) of parents with young children have had a conversation about the issue with a family member, fellow parent or medical professional. Overall, 47 percent have spoken to friends or fellow parents, 28 percent have spoken to their child's doctor, and 14 percent have spoken to a pharmacist. One in five (21 percent) have gone online to read more about the issue.

When it comes to making decisions about the safety and effectiveness of over the counter drugs for their young children more generally, pediatricians are parents' most trusted source. Fully seven in ten (71 percent) say they trust them a lot to provide accurate information about whether over-the-counter drugs can be used safely. Behind the child's own doctor, 50 percent of parents would trust their pharmacist to provide this information, and 41 percent would trust national organizations of pediatricians. On the other end of the spectrum is drug advertising: just over half (54 percent) of parents of young children say they have little or no confidence in ads to provide accurate information about the safety and effectiveness of over-the-counter medicines for children.

Though parents do a lot of talking to friends and family about this issue, only 24 percent would trust them "a lot" when it comes to advice about safety and effectiveness, about the same number that would trust information from the federal Food and Drug Administration or the product information provided by the manufacturer.

In line with this faith in their pediatricians, the survey found that many parents would prefer to make decisions about general drug effectiveness in consultation with their doctor rather than having these decisions made by the FDA. Overall, half of parents of young children say that consumers and their doctors "should decide for themselves whether over-the counter medicines seem effective for them", while 45 percent said that determining effectiveness should be left up to the FDA, with the agency "pulling drugs from the market if they determine they don't work well."

Asked about a hypothetical situation in which the FDA were to label kids over-the-counter cold medicines as safe but claim that there was not enough evidence to declare them effective, the plurality of parents of young children (49 percent) said they would continue using these medicines if their doctor recommended them. Just over a quarter would use them even without a doctor's recommendation, and 22 percent would not use them no matter what their doctor said.

In general, Americans overall look very similar to parents in their views on these topics. A few highlights:

- The large majority of Americans are at least somewhat confident in the safety of over-the-counter drugs sold in the United States, including 41 percent who are “very confident” and 43 percent who are “somewhat confident”
- Though a majority (64 percent) are also confident in the safety of *children’s* over-the-counter drugs, this is 20 percentage points lower than the general measure above
- Half of Americans (52 percent) think that pharmaceutical companies do not do enough testing to ensure that children’s over-the-counter drugs are safe and effective, compared to a third who believe they do
- Half of Americans (51 percent) say consumers in consultation with their doctors should decide for themselves whether OTC medicines seem effective for them, while 43 percent instead believe the FDA should hold this responsibility, pulling products from the shelves if they determine they don’t work well.

**Methodology**

The NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health Survey, *Children’s OTC Cold Medicines: The Public, and Parents, Weigh In*, is part of a series of projects about health-related issues by NPR (National Public Radio), the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Harvard School of Public Health. Representatives of the three organizations worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and to analyze the results, with NPR maintaining sole editorial control over its broadcasts on the surveys. The survey research team included Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., Claudia Deane, M.A., and Liz Hamel from the Kaiser Family Foundation; Professor Robert Blendon, Sc.D., and John Benson, M.A. of the Harvard School of Public Health; and Anne Gudenkauf, Joe Neel, Allison Aubrey, and Joanne Silberner from NPR. Fieldwork was done by telephone Nov. 15 – 20, suspended for the Thanksgiving holiday, and then completed Nov. 25, 2007, among a nationally representative sample of 1,522 randomly selected respondents ages 18 and over, including an oversample of parents of young children, by ICR/International Communications Research. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Sizes of the relevant populations and their associated margins of sampling error are:

	<i>N</i>	<i>Margin of sampling error</i>
Total population	1,522	+/- 3 percentage points
Parent of child <18	759	+/- 5 percentage points
Parent of child <6	572	+/- 5 percentage points

For results based on smaller subsets of respondents the margin of sampling error is somewhat higher.

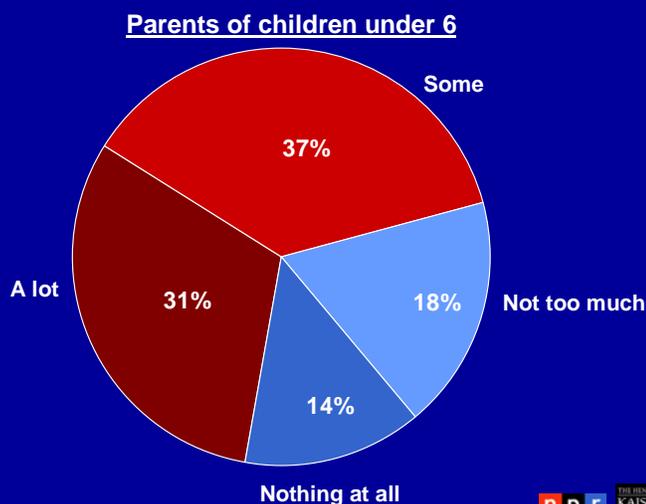
Please note: (1) Table percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. (2) Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll.

Full question wording and all results are available separately at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).

Chart 1

## Most Parents Aware of Recent Discussions About Kids' OTC Cold Medicines

Lately there has been some discussion of the safety and effectiveness of over-the-counter cold and cough medicines for younger children among groups such as the FDA, drug manufacturers, pediatricians, and in the news. Would you say you have heard a lot, some, not too much or nothing at all about this?



Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)

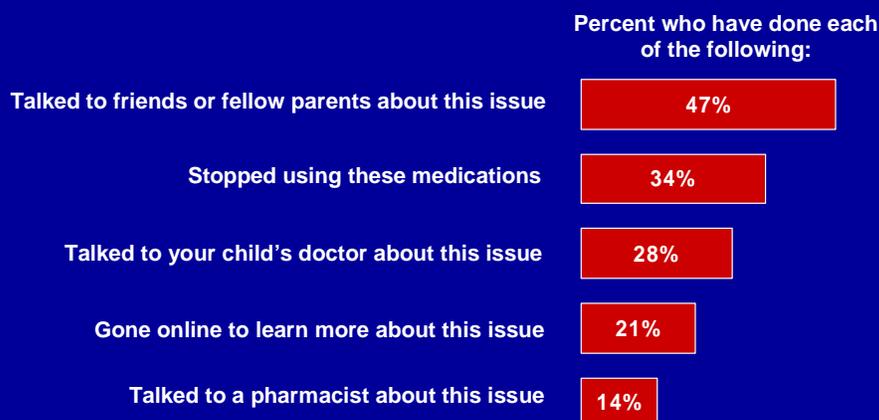


Chart 2

## Parents Taking Steps in Reaction to Recent News about Safety/Effectiveness

As a result of hearing about these discussions on the safety and effectiveness of over-the-counter cold and cough medicines for children, have you done any of the following things in recent weeks, or not?

**Parents of children under 6**



Note: Though question was asked only of those who said they had heard discussions (86 percent), results here are repercentaged to represent all parents of children under 6.

Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)

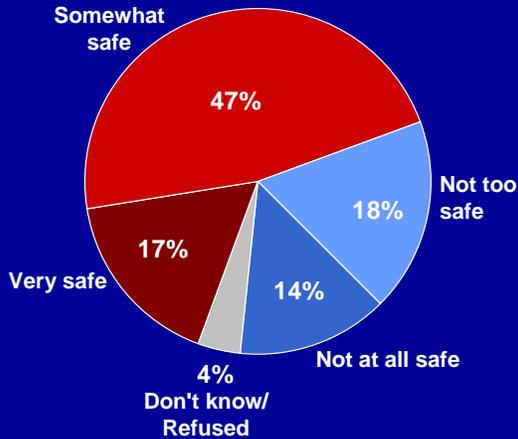


Chart 3

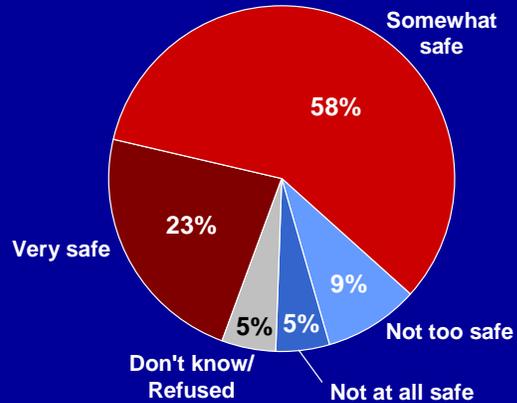
## Most Parents View Kids' OTC Cold Medicines as at Least Somewhat Safe

### Parents of children under 6

In your own view, how safe are children's over-the-counter cold and cough medicines for children under age 2?



In your own view, how safe are children's over-the-counter cold and cough medicines for children age 2 to under 6 years old?



Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



Chart 4

## Most Parents View Kids' OTC Drugs as at Least Somewhat Effective for Symptoms and Sleep

Very effective    Somewhat effective    Not too effective    Not at all effective

### Parents of children under 6

In your own view, how effective are children's over-the-counter cold and cough medicines in ... for children under age 2?



In your own view, how effective are children's over-the-counter cold and cough medicines in ... for children age 2 to under 6 years?



... helping get a good night's sleep



Note: "Don't know/Refused" responses not shown

Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)

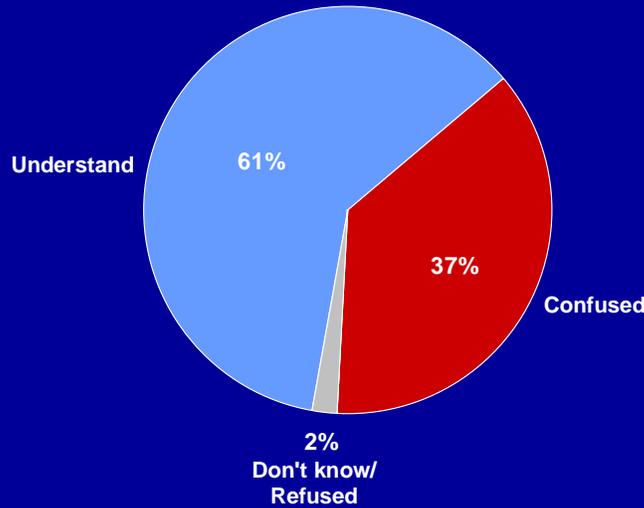


Chart 5

## But Significant Minority Remain Confused about Safety/Effectiveness

Would you say you understand whether over-the-counter cold and cough medicines are safe and effective for use in your own children, or would you say you are confused about this?

Parents of children under 6



Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



Chart 6

## Drs & Pharmacists Most Trusted Sources of Info on OTC Drugs

Please tell me how much you trust each of the following sources to provide accurate information about the safety and effectiveness of over-the-counter medicines for children.

Parents of children under 6

Percent saying they trust each "a lot"



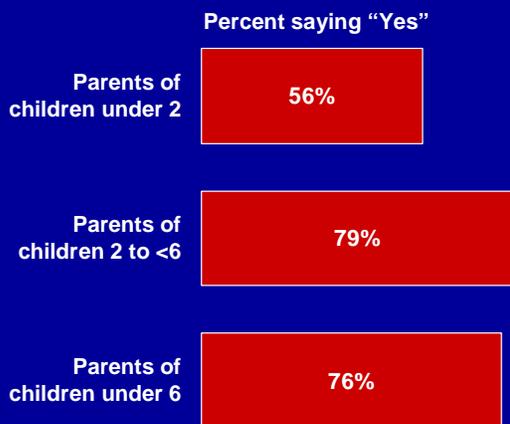
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



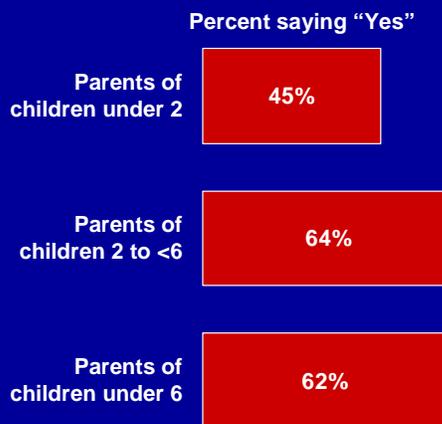
Chart 7

## Usage of Kids' OTC Cold Medicines Widespread, Parents Report Doctors Recommending

Have you ever used over-the-counter cold or cough medicines for your children [in each of the following age groups], or not?



Has your child's doctor ever specifically recommended that you use an over-the-counter cold or cough medicine for your children [in each of the following age groups], or not?



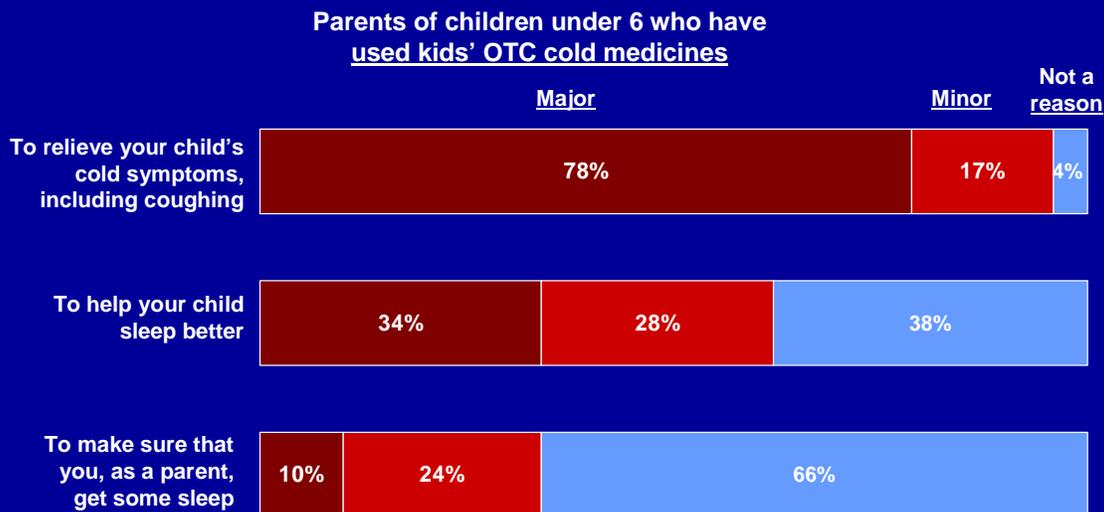
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



Chart 8

## More Parents Use Kids' OTC Drugs to Relieve Symptoms than to Ensure Sleep

For each, tell me if this is a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason why you have used over-the-counter cold or cough medicines for your children...



Note: "Don't know/Refused" responses not shown  
 Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)

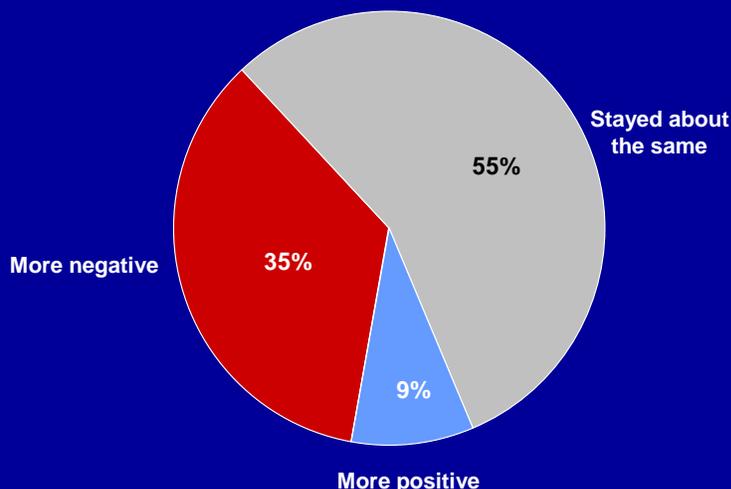


Chart 9

## Changing Views on Kids' OTC Cold Medicines?

All in all, thinking back over the past several years, would you say your views on the safety of children's over-the-counter cold and cough medicines have become more negative, more positive, or would you say they have stayed about the same?

Parents of children under 6



Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)

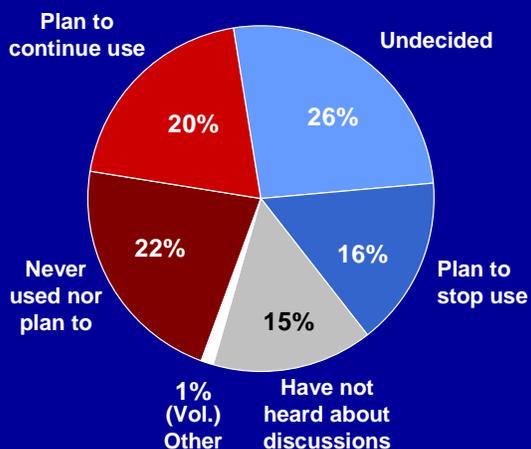


Chart 10

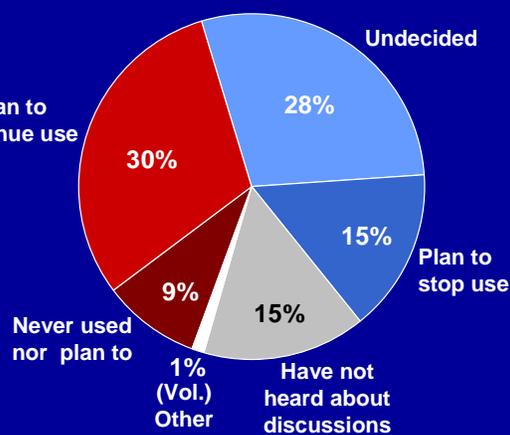
## Going Forward: What Parents Plan to Do

Which of the following best describes your reaction to the recent news about the safety and effectiveness of over-the-counter cold and cough medicines for children:

Parents of children under 2



Parents of children 2 to under 6 years old



Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)

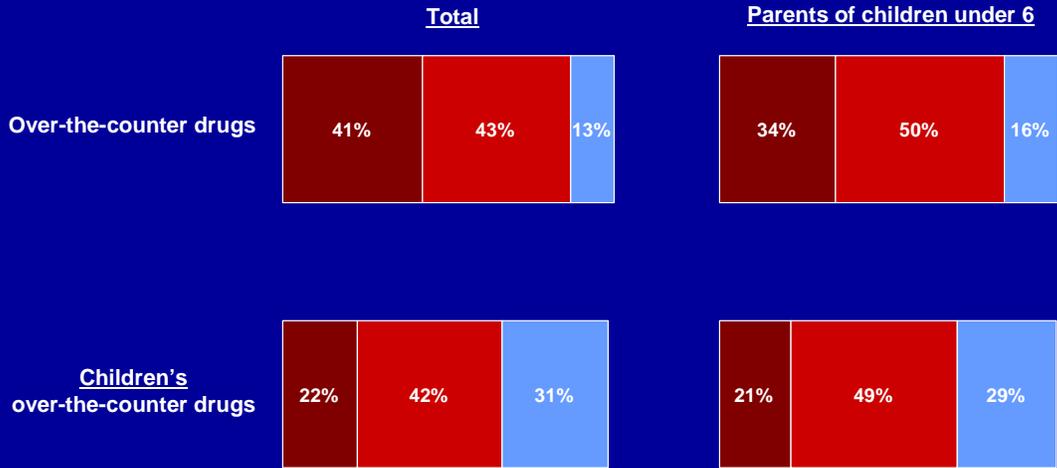


Chart 11

## More Confidence in Safety of OTC Drugs Generally Than Children's OTC Drugs

Overall, how confident are you in the safety of ... sold in the U.S.?

■ Very confident    
 ■ Somewhat confident    
 ■ Not too/Not at all confident



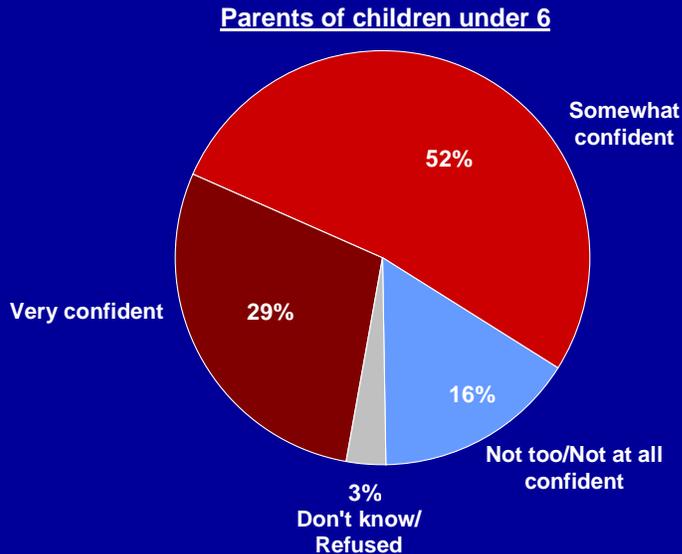
Note: "Don't know/Refused" responses not shown  
 Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



Chart 12

## Parents Confident Receiving Enough Information

Last time you bought an over-the-counter drug that your child had never taken before, how confident were you that you had enough information about the drug?



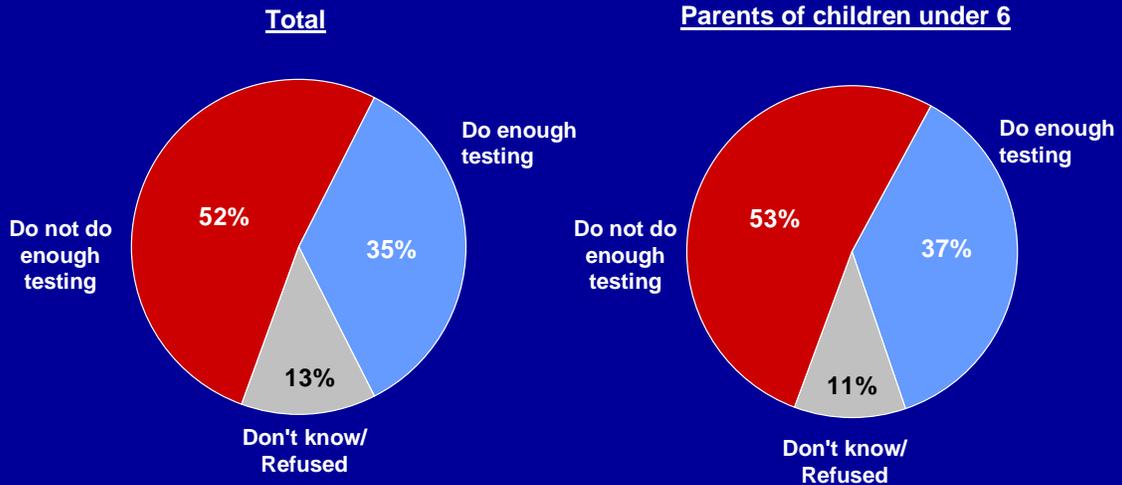
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



Chart 13

## Majority Think Kids' OTC Drugs Not Well Tested

Do you think that pharmaceutical companies do enough testing to ensure that over-the-counter drugs for children are safe and effective, or do you think they do not do enough testing on these drugs?



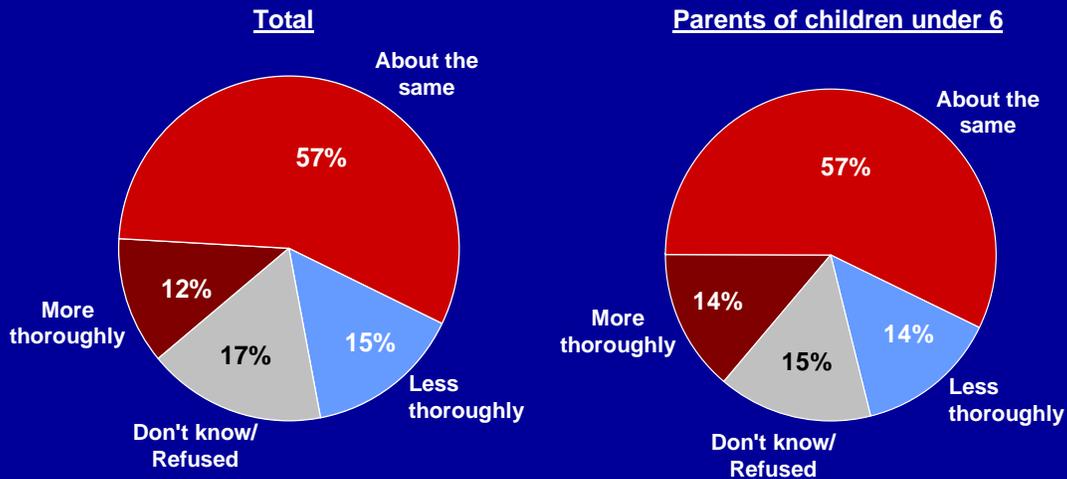
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



Chart 14

## But Majority also Believe Testing on Par with Adults

As far as you know, do pharmaceutical companies test over-the-counter drugs for children more thoroughly than they test similar drugs for adults, less thoroughly, or about the same amount?



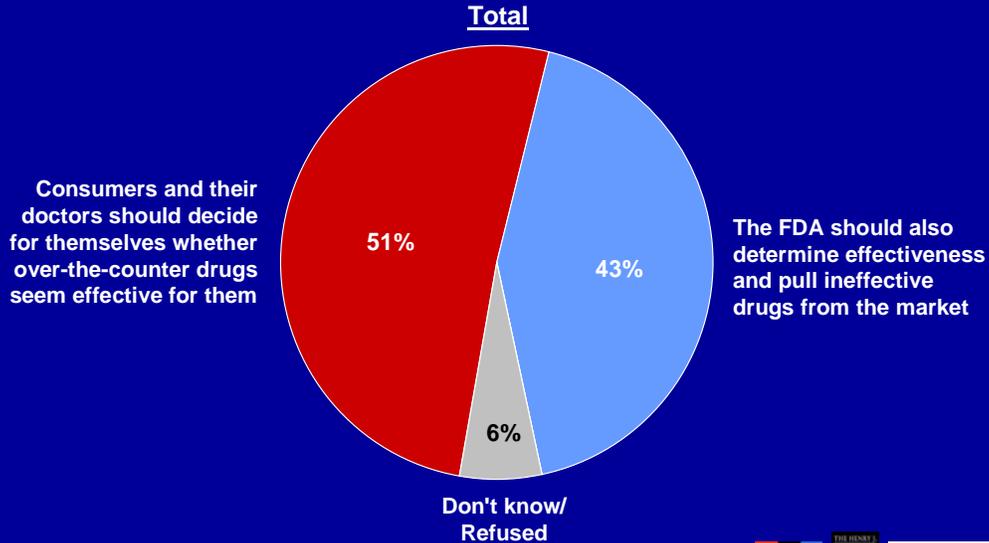
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



Chart 15

## Effectiveness: Who Should Decide?

One of the FDA's main roles is to make sure that over-the-counter drugs are safe for consumer use. Do you think that the FDA should also be in charge of determining whether over-the-counter medicines are effective, pulling drugs from the market if they determine they don't work well, or do you think that consumers and their doctors should decide for themselves whether over-the-counter medicines seem effective for them?



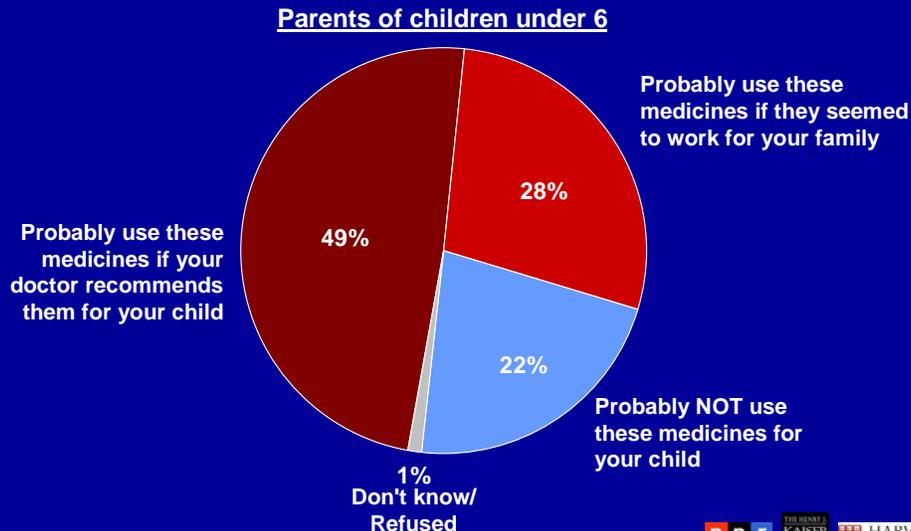
Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)



Chart 16

## Parents Want to Decide Themselves About Use of Kids' OTC Cold Medicines

If the FDA were to put a label on children's cold and cough medicines saying that they have been found to be safe but there is no evidence that they actually work in relieving children's cold symptoms, would you...



Source: NPR/KFF/HSPH *Children's OTC Cold Medicines* (Nov. 15-25, 2007)





HARVARD  
School of Public Health

## **The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation**

### **Headquarters**

2400 Sand Hill Road  
Menlo Park, CA 94025  
Phone: (650) 854-9400 Fax: (650) 854-4800

### **Washington Offices and Barbara Jordan Conference Center**

1330 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20005  
Phone: (202) 347-5270 Fax: (202) 347-5274

**[www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org)**

Additional copies of this publication (#7726) are available on the  
Kaiser Family Foundation's website at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).

*NPR (National Public Radio) is an internationally acclaimed producer and distributor of noncommercial news, talk, and entertainment programming. A privately supported, not-for-profit membership organization, NPR serves a growing audience of 26 million Americans each week in partnership with more than 860 independently operated, noncommercial public radio stations. Each NPR Member Station serves local listeners with a distinctive combination of national and local programming. With original online content and audio streaming, NPR.org offers hourly newscasts, special features and ten years of archived audio and information.*

*The Kaiser Family Foundation is a non-profit, private operating foundation dedicated to providing information and analysis on health care issues to policymakers, the media, the health care community, and the general public. The Foundation is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.*

*Harvard School of Public Health is dedicated to advancing the public's health through learning, discovery, and communication. More than 300 faculty members are engaged in teaching and training the 800-plus student body in a broad spectrum of disciplines crucial to the health and well being of individuals and populations around the world. Programs and projects range from the molecular biology of AIDS vaccines to the epidemiology of cancer; from risk analysis to violence prevention; from maternal and children's health to quality of care measurement; from health care management to international health and human rights.*