

# Your medicines matter – full survey results

## Introduction

This report outlines the key findings of a survey of the UK public conducted on behalf of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. The survey explored how carefully people follow instructions that come with medicines, for example on how to take them, how often to take them and for how long.

Interviews were conducted with a cross-section of the UK public, with quotas set for region.

### Regional profile

	<i>Number of interviews</i>	<i>% of total</i>
London / South East / South / South West	91	36
Midlands / East Anglia / Wales	78	31
North / Scotland	81	32

We also ensured that interviews were conducted with a cross-section in terms of gender and age group.

### Sample profile

	<i>Number of interviews</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Male	109	44
Female	141	56
18-39	81	32
40-59	90	36
60 or more	79	32

Interviews were conducted using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). Telephone numbers were randomly generated by computer.

All interviews were conducted by ORC's telephone centre between 7 and 12 August 2001.

## Prescription v non-prescription medicines

Survey respondents were asked to think generally about any prescription and non-prescription medicines they have taken in the last few years.

In total 82% of UK adults claim to have taken some kind of medicine prescribed by a doctor in the last few years.

Of those who have taken a prescription medicine, 83% claim to always follow exactly the instructions that come with the medication, although 17% are less vigilant.

### Following instructions for prescription medicines

	<b>Total %</b>
Always stick <i>exactly</i> to the instructions.	83
Don't always stick to the instructions.	17

*Base: all who have taken prescription medicines (204)*

There are differences by demographic group. Those respondents least likely to follow the instructions given with prescription medicines are men and the under 40's, as indicated below.

### Following instructions for prescription medicines: by sub-group

	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age group</b>		
	<b>Male %</b>	<b>Female %</b>	<b>18-39 %</b>	<b>40-59 %</b>	<b>60+ %</b>
Always stick <i>exactly</i> to instructions.	80	85	76	82	90
Don't always stick to instructions.	20	15	24	18	10

*Base: all who have taken prescription medicines (204)*

Looking at *non-prescription* medicines, such as aspirin and cough mixture, 80% claim to have taken non-prescription medicines in the last few years. Looking just at those respondents who have taken non-prescription medicines, 22% have not always followed the instructions given.

### Following instructions for non-prescription medicines

	<b>Total %</b>
Always stick <i>exactly</i> to the instructions.	78
Don't always stick to the instructions.	22

*Base: all who have taken non-prescription medicines (200)*

There is again a slight gender bias, although this time it is men who are less vigilant in following instructions. However, as for prescription medicines, it is the under 40 age group who demonstrate lower vigilance. Three out of ten in the 18-39 age group claim that they don't always stick to instructions for non-prescription medicines.

**Following instructions for non-prescription medicines: by sub-group**

	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age group</b>		
	<b>Male %</b>	<b>Female %</b>	<b>18-39 %</b>	<b>40-59 %</b>	<b>60+ %</b>
Always stick <i>exactly</i> to instructions.	75	80	70	79	90
Don't always stick to instructions.	25	20	30	21	10

*Base: all who have taken non-prescription medicines (204)*

So generally the over 60 age group tends to be good at following the instructions given with all kinds of medication, and the 40-59 age group is also reasonably vigilant.

However there is considerable evidence that the under 40 age group needs to be more careful in following directions for both prescription and non-prescription medicines.

In the next section we look at the different kinds of instruction that are given with medicines and we will see that a similar picture occurs.

## Different kinds of instruction

Instructions given with medicines can encompass how regularly to take medicines (e.g. every two hours), how long to take them and directions on how to use (e.g. take with a meal, do not mix with alcohol, do not take when driving). The table below summarises the extent to which people always follow these different kinds of instruction.

### Following directions for different kinds of instruction

	<i>Type of instruction</i>		
	<i>How often</i> %	<i>How long</i> %	<i>How to use</i> %
Yes –follow instructions exactly	76	80	80
No – don't always follow instructions exactly	24	19	20
Unsure / not relevant	1	1	1

*Base: all respondents (250)*

It is therefore clear that the UK public does not always follow these kinds of instructions to the letter. In particular just under one in four people sometimes neglect to follow instructions on how regularly to take medicines.

Concentrating just on those people who do *not* always follow these kinds of instructions yields the following table.

### Percentage NOT following directions for different kinds of instruction: by sub-group

	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Age group</i>		
	<i>Male</i> %	<i>Female</i> %	<i>18-39</i> %	<i>40-59</i> %	<i>60+</i> %
Do NOT always follow instructions...					
On how often to take medicine	25	23	27	27	16
On how long to take medicine	20	18	35	17	6
On how to use medicine	20	19	28	20	10

*Base: all respondents (250)*

Although there is little difference between the claimed behaviour of men and women, there are clear differences between the age groups. The older and middle-age groups tend to follow all kinds of instructions consistently, although the 40-59 group could improve on how regularly they take medication. However it is again the under 40 age group that demonstrates the greatest tendency to neglect all kinds of instructions.

It is worth pointing out that the 20% or so of people who do not always follow each kind of instruction are not the same people in each case. Amalgamating the data in the above table, we can establish that only 55% always follow *all* these kinds of instruction to the letter.

#### Percentage always following all kinds of direction

	<b>Total</b> %
Always follow all kinds of instruction exactly	55
Don't always follow all kinds of instruction	42
Unsure	3

*Base: all respondents (250)*

So although just over half of respondents claim to be vigilant about all kinds of directions, over four in ten people are less vigilant, neglecting some directions some of the time.

Looking at just those respondents who have neglected at least some of those kinds of direction at some stage yields the following table.

#### Percentage neglecting directions some of the time: by sub-group

	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age group</b>		
	<b>Male</b> %	<b>Female</b> %	<b>18-39</b> %	<b>40-59</b> %	<b>60+</b> %
Total who have neglected at least one of the different kinds of instruction	42	43	58	44	24

*Base: all respondents (250)*

There is little difference by gender. However it is again the younger age group that is *least* likely to be vigilant. Almost six in ten people in the 18-39 group admits to failing to follow directions on at least one occasion.

We can look at some general directions on use of medicines in more detail.

#### Following instructions in detail

	<b>Total</b> %
Have taken medication causing drowsiness against directions	17
Have mixed alcohol and medication against directions	24
Have stopped taking medication before end of course	33

*Base: all respondents taking the relevant medication*

Looking first of all at medicines that might cause drowsiness and with instructions not to drive or operate machinery when taking them, 41% claim to have taken such medication in the last few years. Of these people 82% always follow those instructions exactly and 17% sometimes neglect such instructions.

Some medicines come with directions that they shouldn't be mixed with alcohol. Almost half of the UK public (48%) claim to have taken such medication in the last few years. Of such people 76% claim to have followed the instruction not to mix the medicine with alcohol. This means that almost one in four (24%) have neglected that instruction at some stage.

An even greater number have stopped taking medication before the end of the prescribed course, with 33% claiming to have done so on at least one occasion (mainly because they felt better). When respondents stopped taking their medication prematurely, in two out of three cases they failed to tell their doctor.

There are again some demographic variations.

**Following instructions in detail: by sub-group**

	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Age group</i>		
	<i>Male</i> %	<i>Female</i> %	<i>18-39</i> %	<i>40-59</i> %	<i>60+</i> %
Taken medication causing drowsiness	22	15	32	10	8
Mixed alcohol and medication	24	24	30	28	9
Stopped taking medication	28	37	52	31	16

*Base: all respondents taking the relevant medication*

Women are particularly likely to have stopped taking medication before the end of the course, although there are otherwise few variations by gender.

As before the key demographic variations are to be found in the analysis by age group. The 18-39 group are again particularly likely to neglect the different kinds of instruction.

## Other issues

The UK public demonstrates good practice on a number of related issues.

For example almost nine out of ten would look for advice if they were confused about directions on how and when to use medicines.

### Response to confusion about directions

	<b>Total %</b>
Look for advice before taking the medicine	88
Take it anyway	8
Not take the medicine at all	3
Unsure	1

*Base: all respondents (250)*

The sources of advice most likely to be approached are the GP (58% would approach), followed by the pharmacist (56%), a friend or relative (8%) or a nurse or practice nurse (6%).

Only one in ten would potentially jeopardise their health by taking the medicine anyway or indeed by not taking their medicine at all.

There are again some demographic variations.

### Response to confusion about directions: by sub-group

	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age group</b>		
	<b>Male %</b>	<b>Female %</b>	<b>18-39 %</b>	<b>40-59 %</b>	<b>60+ %</b>
Look for advice before taking	86	89	83	88	92
Take it anyway	7	9	12	8	5
Not take the medicine at all	6	1	4	4	1
Unsure	1	1	1	-	1

*Base: all respondents (250)*

It is again the 18-39 group that stands out, as it is most likely to proceed without seeking advice. However, even in this age group over eight out of ten would look for advice before taking their medication.

Another area in which the UK public demonstrates a reluctance to take a risk is in the amount of a medicine they are willing to take. Less than one in ten people have ever taken more of a medicine than prescribed without checking with their doctor or pharmacist.

**Whether would take more medicine without checking**

	<b>Total</b>
	<b>%</b>
Yes	7
No	93

*Base: all respondents (250)*

There are again some demographic variations.

**Whether would take more medicine without checking: by sub-group**

	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age group</b>		
	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>18-39</b>	<b>40-59</b>	<b>60+</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	9	6	12	8	1
No	91	94	88	92	99

*Base: all respondents (250)*

The 18-39 group again stands out, although even in this age group the majority would check before increasing their medication.

There are, therefore, a number of areas in which the UK public demonstrates good practice. Nevertheless there are some additional causes for concern.

Almost two out of ten respondents (18%) admitted that they have failed to take medicines that they have been prescribed, with 22% of those in the 18-39 age group (and particularly women) most likely to have done so.

**Whether respondent has ever NOT taken prescribed medicine**

	<b>Total</b>
	<b>%</b>
Yes	18
No	82

*Base: all respondents (250)*

**Whether respondent has ever NOT taken prescribed medicine: by sub-group**

	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age group</b>		
	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>18-39</b>	<b>40-59</b>	<b>60+</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	13	21	22	17	14
No	87	78	77	83	86

*Base: all respondents (250)*

In such cases respondents had not bothered picking up the prescribed medicine, kept it unused, thrown it away or taken it back to the doctor or pharmacy.

When buying a medicine from a pharmacist, one third of respondents claimed that they do not always tell the pharmacist if they are taking other medication.

**Whether respondent tells pharmacist if taking other medicine**

	<b>Total %</b>
Yes – always	54
No – not always	34
Unsure / situation not occurred	12

*Base: all respondents (250)*

Men and those in the 18-39 age group are least likely to tell the pharmacist that they are taking other medication.

**Whether respondent tells pharmacist if taking other medicine: by sub-group**

	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age group</b>		
	<b>Male %</b>	<b>Female %</b>	<b>18-39 %</b>	<b>40-59 %</b>	<b>60+ %</b>
Yes – always	41	63	49	58	53
No – not always	45	25	44	34	22
Unsure / situation not occurred	14	12	6	8	25

*Base: all respondents (250)*

This situation is potentially dangerous to patients' well-being and people should be encouraged to always tell their doctor or pharmacist about any other medication they are taking.