

Public's Opinion Of FDA Shows Room For Improvement

Contributed by Harris International
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Less than half believe FDA is doing a good job on most tasks

A new Harris Interactive/HealthDay poll finds the reputation of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has improved since a similar survey conducted a year ago in April 2008.

For example, positive ratings for managing prescription drug recalls or withdrawals increased from 39% to 53%. However, most people still give the FDA negative ratings on ensuring the safety of imported food (56%) and drugs (52%), and on getting new drugs to the market more quickly (54%).

According to U.S. adults, the two top priorities for the FDA are ensuring the safety of food eaten in the U.S. (59%) and ensuring the safety and efficacy of new prescription drugs (37%). On both of these, people's opinions of the FDA are divided – 48% positive to 49% negative on food, and 47% to 47% on the safety and efficacy of new drugs.

These are some of the results of a Harris Interactive/HealthDay Poll conducted online within the United States between April 13 and 15, 2009 among a national cross section of 2,495 adults age 18 and over.

According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), food safety has not improved in the past three years. Approximately 76 million people in the U.S. suffer from food borne illnesses each year, of which 300,000 are hospitalized and 5,000 die.

The White House notes that the average number of outbreaks attributed to produce and other foods average 350 per year, compared to only 100 per year in the early 1990s. The FDA currently has the resources to inspect only about 7,000 of the 150,000 food processing plants and warehouses each year.

Dr. Margaret Hamburg, recently appointed as Commissioner of the FDA by President Obama, has her work cut out for her, but things seem to be heading in the right direction. Obama created a Food Safety Working Group to examine and upgrade food safety laws and is investing in the FDA to substantially increase the number of food inspectors and modernize food safety labs.

The FDA took a more proactive approach recently in issuing a blanket warning about possible pistachio contamination upon first suspicion, rather than waiting for final investigation results.

Food recalls are not always clear to the public. Many people remember the 2009 recall of peanut products (90%), and the 2006 recall of spinach (63%), however, over half (56%) remember a recall of tomatoes in 2008. Tomatoes were under investigation in this outbreak but never officially recalled.

The outbreak turned out to be due to jalapeño peppers, and only a third (34%) of adults remembers this incident.

Last year, the public gave the FDA its lowest rating in five years for ensuring the safety and efficacy of new prescription drugs (35% positive/58% negative). According to Humphrey Taylor, Chairman of The Harris Poll, "Perceptions of drug safety have gone up and down. As stories break about drug problems and Vioxx comes to mind those numbers change."

We seem to have recovered from the low figures of last year." He continued, "Every time you get a food recall, you get a huge blip in public opinion. Those kinds of stories on food safety and drug safety really do have a big impact."

Methodology

Harris Interactive conducted this online survey within the United States between April 13 and 15, 2009 among a national cross section of 2,495 adults age 18 and over.

Figures for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, income and region were weighted where necessary to align with population proportions. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

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