

# *Older Adults Think Their Medicines Cause Symptoms but Often Don't Tell Their Doctors*

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## **Goals of the study:**

The purpose of the study was to ask older adults about the types of symptoms they experienced, how often they thought these were caused by their medicines, and whether they told their doctor about the symptoms.

## **Who was included in this study?**

In 2005, The University of Iowa conducted an internet-based survey of people enrolled in Medicare who were at least 65 years old. In the survey, participants were asked if they had experienced a list of health symptoms in the past month. The symptoms included headaches, dizziness or balance problems, stomach/gastrointestinal problems, muscle aches, incontinence or problems with urinating, rash/itching, sleep problems, sexual problems, mood changes and fatigue. If they experienced a symptom, they were asked if they thought it was related to a medicine they were taking and if they reported the symptom to a physician. If they did not report the symptom, they were asked if they intended to report the symptom to their physician in the future.

Other questions on the survey were age, race, sex, education and income; number of medicines used on a regular basis; concerns about medicines; how necessary they felt it was to take their medicines; whether they thought their health was excellent, very good, good, fair or poor; how many doctor visits they made in the past six months; number of hospitalizations in the past six months; number of emergency room visits in the past six months; whether they had to pay part of their prescription costs; the number of pharmacies where they got their prescription medicines; and medication adherence.

## **What did we find?**

Of the 1220 Medicare enrollees who participated, 62% reported having at least 1 of the 10 symptoms in the past month. The percent of people who experienced any given symptom ranged from 6% to 31.1% (see table). Depending on which symptom was experienced, between 11.7% and 48.0% of people thought the symptom was related to the medicine they were taking. Between 34.3% and 55.2% reported it to their physicians, depending on the symptom. Patients were most likely to report a symptom to their doctor if it was a muscular ache, fatigue, sleep problem, sexual problem, or gastrointestinal problem. They were less likely to report headache and incontinence to their doctor (see table). The people who had stronger concerns about medicines and those who thought that a symptom was due to medications were most likely to report a symptom to their doctor.

**Table: Self-reported symptoms in the past month among 1220 Medicare enrollees**

Symptoms	% who experienced symptom	% who thought it was caused by a medicine <sup>a</sup>	% who reported it to a doctor <sup>a</sup>
Muscle aches	31.1%	14.7%	43.2%
Sleep problems	30.1%	11.7%	44.4%
Fatigue	27.6%	22.2%	48.1%
Stomach problems	19.2%	25.6%	50.4%
Dizziness	15.7%	34.4%	55.2%
Incontinence	15.8%	11.8%	41.0%
Headache	14.1%	24.0%	34.3%
Rash/itching	11.5%	28.6%	50.7%
Sexual problems	10.2%	48.0%	48.8%
Mood changes	6.0%	32.9%	41.1%

## Conclusions:

- Nearly two-thirds of older adults have experienced one or more symptoms in the past month.
- People often don't report their symptoms to their doctors, but if they think a symptom is due to a medicine, they are more likely to do so. Still, many people don't report symptoms to their doctor even if they think a medication is causing it.
- People with stronger concerns about medicines might be more sensitive to their symptoms and more watchful for unwanted reactions, and thus more likely to report symptoms.
- We don't yet know how accurate patients are in assessing whether a symptom is being caused by a medication.

*The summary above is based on research by Olayinka Oladimeji-Shiyanbola, PhD; Karen Farris, PhD; Julie Urmie, PhD; and Bill Doucette, PhD; completed at the University of Iowa College of Pharmacy. <sup>1</sup>The survey was administered by Harris Interactive®. The full article appears in Res Soc Adm Pharm 2009;5:225-233. This work was supported by an Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) Centers for Education and Research on Therapeutics Cooperative Agreement #5 U18HSO16094 (The Iowa Older Adults CERT).*