Despite some benefit, drug ads can be harmful to your health

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While the debate over prescription drug advertising persists, a new study released online in the American Journal of Public Health offers guidelines for improving drug ads in order to minimize potential harm and maximize benefits. The study reveals that while there are some benefits from prescription drug direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA), there are significant risks that are magnified by the prominence of DTCA.

"American television viewers see as many as 16 hours of prescription drug advertisements each year, and the reality is that these ads are not doing a good job of helping consumers make better decisions about their health," said Dominick L. Frosch, Ph.D., assistant professor of medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles and lead author of the study. "If the pharmaceutical industry isn't willing to change the ads to make them more useful to consumers, Congress should consider passing legislation that will regulate the ads to improve the information provided in order to help patients make more informed choices."

Several members of Congress, including Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., are calling for changes to FDA regulations of DTCA. Advocates for prescription drug ads claim that these ads educate consumers, improve the quality of care and contribute to better patient adherence. Opponents argue that they lead to inappropriate prescribing and portray nonmedical problems as treatable medical illnesses.

In a review of the evidence for and against DTCA, Frosch and his

colleagues confirm that there are some benefits to drug ads, but they are limited and can be improved. The evidence clearly shows that there is significant risk and potential harm associated with the current format of prescription drug ads. The majority of ads fail to provide enough information to allow consumers to clearly identify whether the advertised drug is right for them. The over dramatization and emotional portrayal of a drug's benefits can also be misleading to consumers, while the message about its risks are often diluted by contradicting imagery.

In light of these findings, the authors of the study propose new guidelines to improve prescription drug ads so that they better serve the health choices of consumers:

- Ads should help consumers identify whether treatment is right for them by explaining how prevalent the relevant conditions are. They should also describe who may be at risk for conditions that don't present obvious symptoms. For conditions that do present obvious symptoms, they should describe what those symptoms are.

- Ads should provide accurate and specific information about the potential benefits of advertised drugs, and should help consumers realistically judge those benefits by providing precise quantitative information. The ads should state how this drug compared to placebo or other available treatments, including generic drugs.

- Ads should provide specific quantitative information about the potential risks associated with drugs without other visual or audio distractions, so consumers can better understand the risks associated with the prescription drugs.

The study, "A Decade of Controversy: Balancing Policy with Evidence in the Regulation of Prescription Drug Advertising" will be published online in the American Journal of Public Health on November 12th.

Source: Investigator Awards in Health Policy Research