

TV drug ads: The whole truth?

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Consumers should be wary when watching those advertisements for pharmaceuticals on the nightly TV news, as six out of 10 claims could potentially mislead the viewer, say researchers in an article published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

Researchers Adrienne E. Faerber of The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice and David H. Kreling of The University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy found that potentially misleading claims are prevalent throughout consumer-targeted prescription and non-prescription drug advertisements on television.

Over the past 15 years, researchers and policymakers have debated whether drug [advertising](#) informs consumers about new drugs, or persuades consumers to take medicines that they may not need. "Healthcare consumers need unrestricted access to high-quality information about health," said Faerber of The Dartmouth Institute, "but these TV drug ads had misleading statements that omitted or exaggerated information. These results conflict with arguments that drug ads are helping inform consumers."

Pharmaceutical companies spent \$4.8 billion in 2009, surpassing consumer promotion for nonprescription products of \$3 billion that year, the researchers said.

Content for this study came from the Vanderbilt TV News Archive, an indexed archive of recordings of the nightly news broadcasts (the news and commercial segments) on ABC, CBS, and NBC since 1968 and on

CNN since 1992. Researchers viewed advertisements in the 6:30-8:30 pm EST period because the nightly news is a desirable time slot for drug advertisers because of the older audience that watches the nightly news.

The researchers reviewed 168 TV advertisements for prescription and over-the-counter drugs aired between 2008 and 2010, and identified statements that were strongly emphasized in the ad. A team of trained analysts then classified those claims as being truthful, potentially misleading or false.

They found that false claims, which are factually false or unsubstantiated, were rare, with only 1 in 10 claims false. False advertising is illegal and can lead to criminal and civil penalties.

Most claims were potentially misleading – 6 in 10 claims left out important information, exaggerated information, provided opinions, or made meaningless associations with lifestyles, the researchers said.

False or potentially misleading claims may be more frequent in over-the-counter drug ads than ads for [prescription drugs](#) – 6 of 10 claims in prescription drug ads were misleading or false, while 8 of 10 claims in OTC drug ads were misleading or false.

The Food and Drug Administration oversees prescription [drug advertising](#) while the Federal Trade Commission oversees advertising for nonprescription drugs.

The FDA and FTC have different definitions of false and [misleading claims](#). For example, the FDA interpretation says prescription drug advertising must include information about the harms of the drug, but information on harms is left out of most OTC drug ads.

The researchers said there were some limitations in the study method:

the sample was drawn from a 30-minute period of the TV broadcast day on four major networks, and does not represent all ads on TV. Also, they only analyzed what they determined as the most-emphasized claim in each advertisement and the coders need to interpret the meaning of claims to facilitate analysis, which did introduce subjectivity.

"Healthcare [consumers](#) need unrestricted access to high-quality information about health, "said Faerber of The Dartmouth Institute.

"Consumers may see up to 30 hours of television drug advertising each year, while only spending 15 to 20 minutes, on average, at each visit with their primary care physician."

Provided by Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center

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