

JANUARY 2008

# Canadian Survey of Experiences with Primary Health Care in 2007

A DATA SUPPLEMENT TO

Fixing the Foundation: An Update on Primary Health Care  
and Home Care Renewal in Canada



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HEALTH COUNCIL OF CANADA

# Canadian Survey of Experiences with Primary Health Care in 2007

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and Home Care Renewal in Canada

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**About primary health care**

Primary health care is the foundation of Canada's health care system. Primary health care refers to the health professionals and programs that are the first point of contact for patients.

Effective primary health care is community based, promotes healthy lifestyles as a means of preventing disease and injury, and recognizes the importance of other social and economic factors that can affect health. Primary health care professionals treat short-term health issues and manage most chronic conditions. They also recommend strategies to improve both the health of individual patients and the general population.

An excellent primary health care system ensures that the right care is provided at the right time in the right way to the right person. In this way, primary health care can help to prevent acute or chronic health conditions, shorten the duration of illnesses, and reduce the risk of complications.

Accessibility and quality are critical factors in a successful primary health care system. Accessibility means having timely access to a regular primary health care professional and backup health assessment and advice when he or she is unavailable. Quality is defined not only by the excellence of health professionals and programs, but the degree to which assessments and decisions involve the patient. Canadians expect their health care providers to be responsive to their needs and preferences, to communicate clearly and thoroughly, to provide them with information about their health, and to involve them in important decisions about their care.

This document is a data supplement to the report *Fixing the Foundation: An Update on Primary Health Care and Home Care Renewal in Canada*. More context and commentary on primary health care is contained in the report, available at [www.healthcouncilcanada.ca](http://www.healthcouncilcanada.ca).

In 2007, the Health Council of Canada partnered with Statistics Canada to develop and conduct a survey asking approximately 2,200 Canadians about their experiences with primary health care (see *About the survey*). In this document we share what they told us about these experiences.

**Key findings from this survey**

## OVERALL HEALTH

- › 89% of Canadian adults and 77% of seniors report their general health as good, very good or excellent.
- › Many Canadians (33%) and seniors (68%) report having one or more chronic health conditions.

## USE OF AND ACCESS TO PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

- › The majority of Canadian adults (86%) and seniors (93%) report having a regular medical doctor.
- › An additional 10% of Canadians report that they have a regular place of care such as a clinic.
- › In the previous year, many Canadians report needing routine or ongoing care (35%) or immediate care for a minor health problem (29%); visiting an emergency department at least once (24%); and staying at least one night in a hospital, nursing home, or convalescent home (10%).
- › Few Canadians (9%) recall a time in the previous year when they needed health care and did not receive it.
- › Of those who needed routine care or immediate care for a minor health problem, many Canadians report having difficulty accessing routine care (26%) or obtaining immediate care for a minor health problem (24%). Waiting too long for an appointment and difficulty in getting an appointment were the top reasons for not being able to access care.
- › Of the 24% of respondents who visited an emergency department in the year prior to the survey, more than one-third (39%) believe their condition could have been treated by their primary care provider if he or she had been available.

## COMPREHENSIVENESS, CONTINUITY, AND COORDINATION OF CARE

- › Over half of Canadian adults (55%) and seniors (63%) with a regular doctor or place of care have been with the same one for more than seven years.
- › Among Canadians with a regular medical doctor or place of care, the majority (91%) agree or strongly agree that their primary care provider\* delivers a range of services that meets most or all of their primary health care needs.
- › Among Canadians who visited a family doctor at least once in the past 12 months:
  - most report that their primary care providers always find out what their concerns really are (60%) and always take them very seriously (67%).
  - most (76%) say that they did not get conflicting information from different providers.

\* In this report, we use the term *primary care provider* to refer to a regular medical doctor or regular place of care.

- 3
- the majority say they could not remember a time when their test results were not available at the time of their appointment (84%) or when duplicate tests were conducted (92%).
  - one-quarter (27%) report that their primary care providers always talk to them about specific things they could do to improve their health or prevent disease; an equal proportion (25%) report that their providers rarely or never discuss these things.
  - approximately half of respondents report that when a physical exam (55%) or medical test (57%) was conducted, their providers always took time to clearly explain the results.
  - Just over half of Canadian adults (57%) taking prescription medication report that their providers always explain the side effects of their medications; 21% report that this rarely or never occurs.

#### HEALTH CARE MANAGEMENT

Among Canadians with a regular doctor or place of care:

- the majority (89%) agree or strongly agree that their primary care providers work well with other health professionals at their place of care.
- the majority (85%) agree or strongly agree that their primary care providers work well with other professionals such as pharmacists and physiotherapists, as well as other parts of the health care system such as hospitals.

- almost a third (30%) report that a nurse who works with their primary care provider is regularly involved in their care; fewer (17%) report that other health professionals work in the same office as their primary care provider.

#### QUALITY OF CARE AND CONFIDENCE IN THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

- Among Canadians who visited a family doctor at least once in the past 12 months, the majority of adults report that the quality of care they receive from their primary care provider (91%) and the health care system (89%) is good, very good or excellent.
- The majority (77%) of Canadian adults are very confident or somewhat confident that they would receive safe, quality care when needed.
- Just over half of Canadian adults (57%) report that their confidence in the Canadian health care system is about the “same as it ever was.” However, one-third (33%) report their confidence in the system is “falling.”

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

The Health Council of Canada developed the Canadian Survey of Experiences with Primary Health Care to provide new information about access, use, experiences, and outcomes among the general population as well as adults who have chronic health conditions. These survey data offer the only source of pan-Canadian population-based estimates on the topic of experiences with primary health care and chronic illness care. The survey was created by combining questions previously used in Canada with those used in other countries.

This cross-sectional telephone survey was conducted by Statistics Canada in January and February 2007 and administered in either French or English (depending on the preference of the survey participant). A stratified random sample of adults completed the survey (n=2,194). All participants had previously participated in Statistic Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) Cycle 3.1, conducted in 2005.

Adults 18 years or older who live in private households in 10 provinces and three territories were contacted, yielding a response rate of 58%. Results are weighted to be representative of the age and gender distribution of the population. Residents of Indian Reserves and Crown land, full-time members of the Canadian Armed Forces, inmates of institutions, and residents of isolated areas were excluded. No data have been reported that would compromise individual privacy or confidentiality. Instances where small sample sizes require caution in interpreting results have been noted.

## DETAILED FINDINGS AND FIGURES

### What Canadians said about their primary health care

In 2007, the Health Council of Canada partnered with Statistics Canada to develop and conduct a survey asking approximately 2,200 Canadians about their experiences with primary health care. Here we share what they told us about these experiences.

#### OVERALL HEALTH STATUS

The majority of Canadian adults (89%) and seniors (78%) report their health was either good, very good, or excellent (Figure 1).

Many Canadian adults (33%) and two-thirds of seniors (68%) report having one or more of selected chronic health conditions: diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease, mood disorders, arthritis, hypertension, or cancer. Seventeen per cent of Canadian adults have one of these select chronic conditions; an additional 16% report having two or more. More than one quarter (26%) of seniors have one select chronic health condition; and an additional 42% report two or more.<sup>1</sup>

#### USE OF AND ACCESS TO PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

Canadians were asked about their ability to access a primary care provider and obtain health care. Those who report they had trouble accessing health care were also asked about their reason(s).

The majority of Canadian adults (86%) and seniors (93%) report having a regular medical doctor (Figure 2). The number one reason Canadian adults cite for

not having a regular medical doctor is that they did not try to contact one. Among those who do not have a regular medical doctor, 75% (10% of respondents overall) report having a regular place to go if they are sick or need advice about their health.

Many adult Canadians report needing routine or ongoing care (35%), immediate care for a minor health problem<sup>†</sup> (29%) or care from a specialist (35%) within the last 12 months (Figure 3).

Approximately 26% of Canadians who needed routine care indicate that they had difficulty accessing it. Twenty-four per cent of Canadians who needed immediate care for a minor health problem had difficulty accessing it and 23% of Canadians who needed care from a specialist had difficulty getting it. Waiting too long for an appointment and difficulty getting an appointment were among the top reasons Canadians reported for not being able to access care (Figures 4 and 5).

Of the 24% of Canadians who report visiting a hospital emergency department in the prior year, one-third (39%) say the condition could have been treated by their primary care provider if he or she had been available (Figure 6).

Nine per cent of Canadian adults say they could recall a time in the prior year when they needed health care but did not receive it.

<sup>†</sup> Immediate care for a minor health problem such as a fever, headache, a sprained ankle, vomiting or an unexplained rash.

## ABOUT HEALTH CARE REFORM

Evidence indicates that strong primary health care systems improve the population's level of health, reduce health disparities, and buffer the health effects of socioeconomic circumstances at lower cost than health systems that rely more extensively on secondary and tertiary care.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Federal, provincial and territorial governments have made commitments to strengthen primary health care in Canada through investments that span at least 10 years.<sup>5,6</sup>

The 2003 *First Ministers' Accord on Health Care Renewal* committed governments to speed primary health care reforms so that Canadians can routinely receive needed care from an appropriate health care provider. The First Ministers agreed that by 2011, "at least 50 per cent of residents have access to an appropriate health care provider, 24 hours a day, seven days a week." In the 2004 *10-Year Plan to Strengthen Health Care*, this target was described a little differently: "... with the objective of 50 per cent of Canadians having 24/7 access to multidisciplinary teams by 2011."

First Ministers agreed in 2003 to use comparable indicators on key health outcomes and to develop the necessary data infrastructure for reporting to Canadians. The 2004 plan committed governments to establish a best practices network and to continue to work to realize the vision of an electronic health record.

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FIGURE 1  
Canadians describe their health

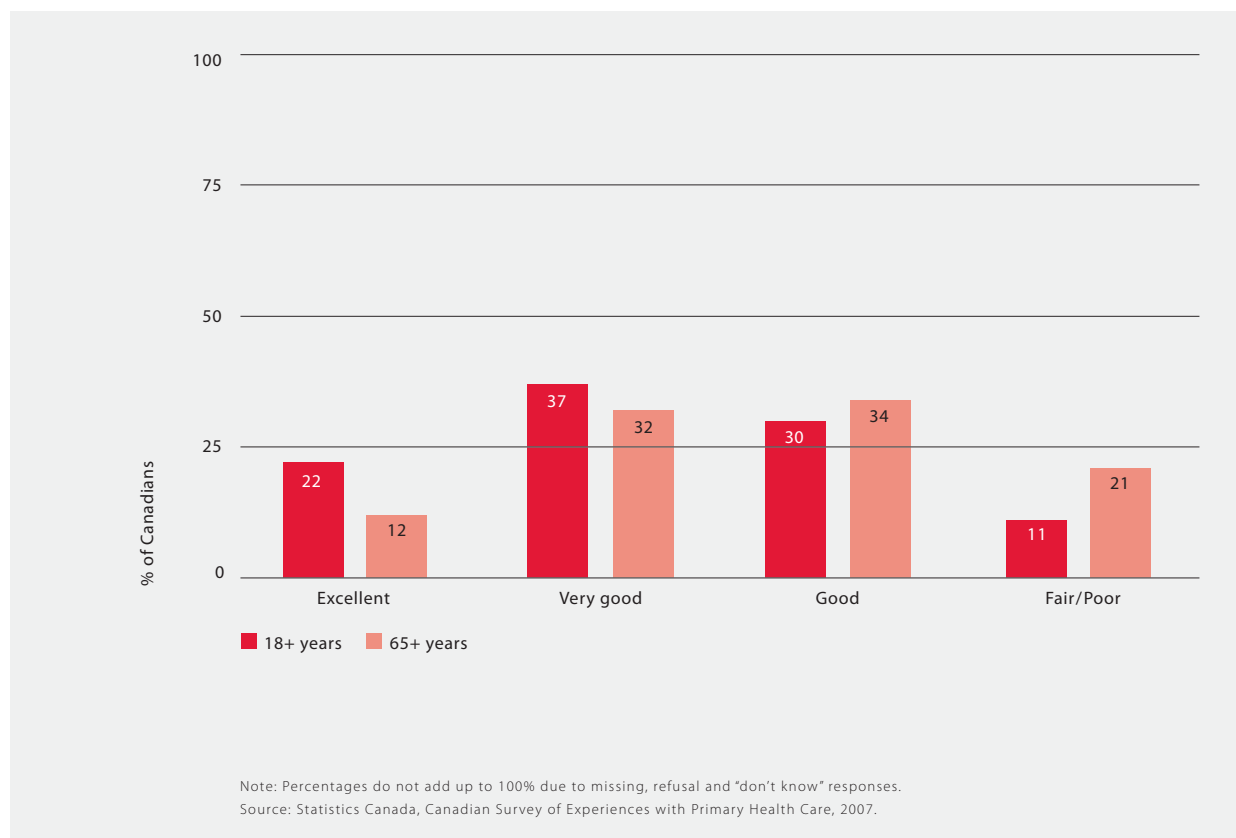


FIGURE 2  
Proportion of Canadians with a regular medical doctor

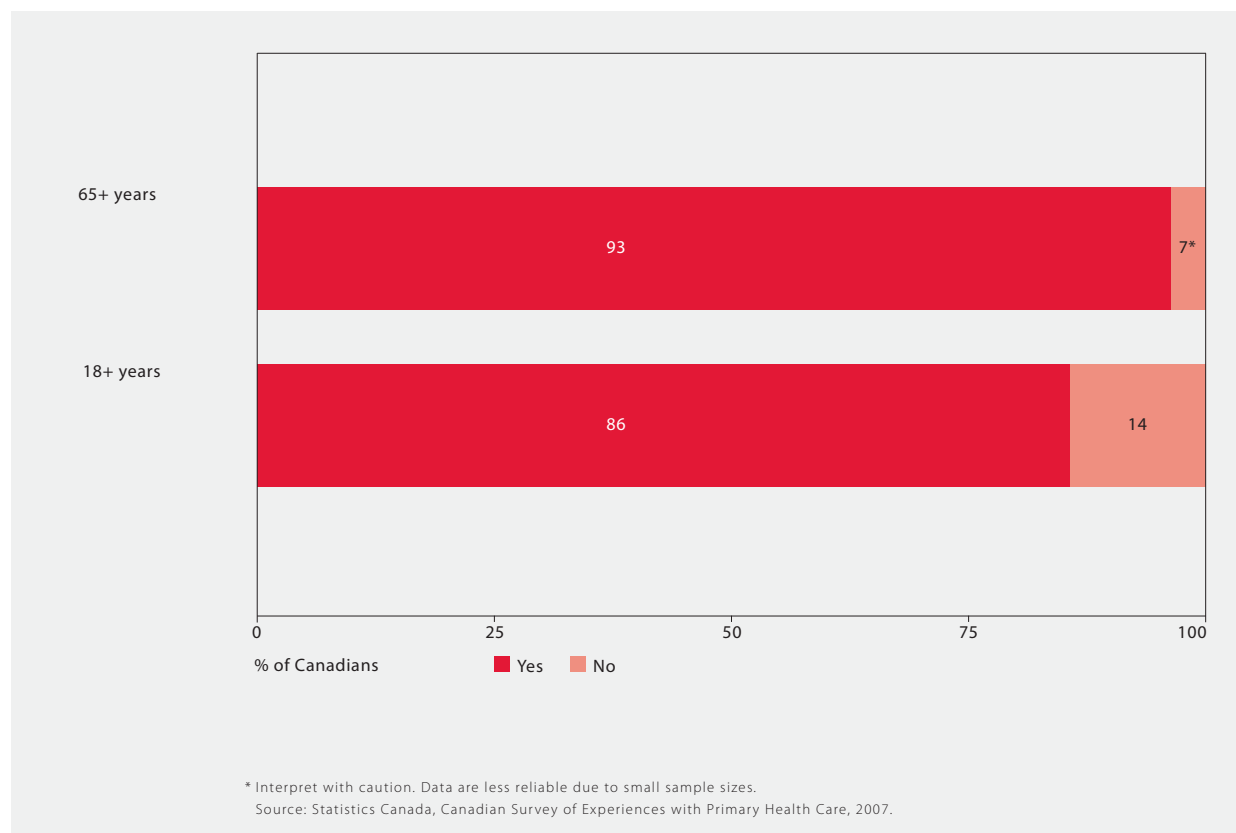


FIGURE 3

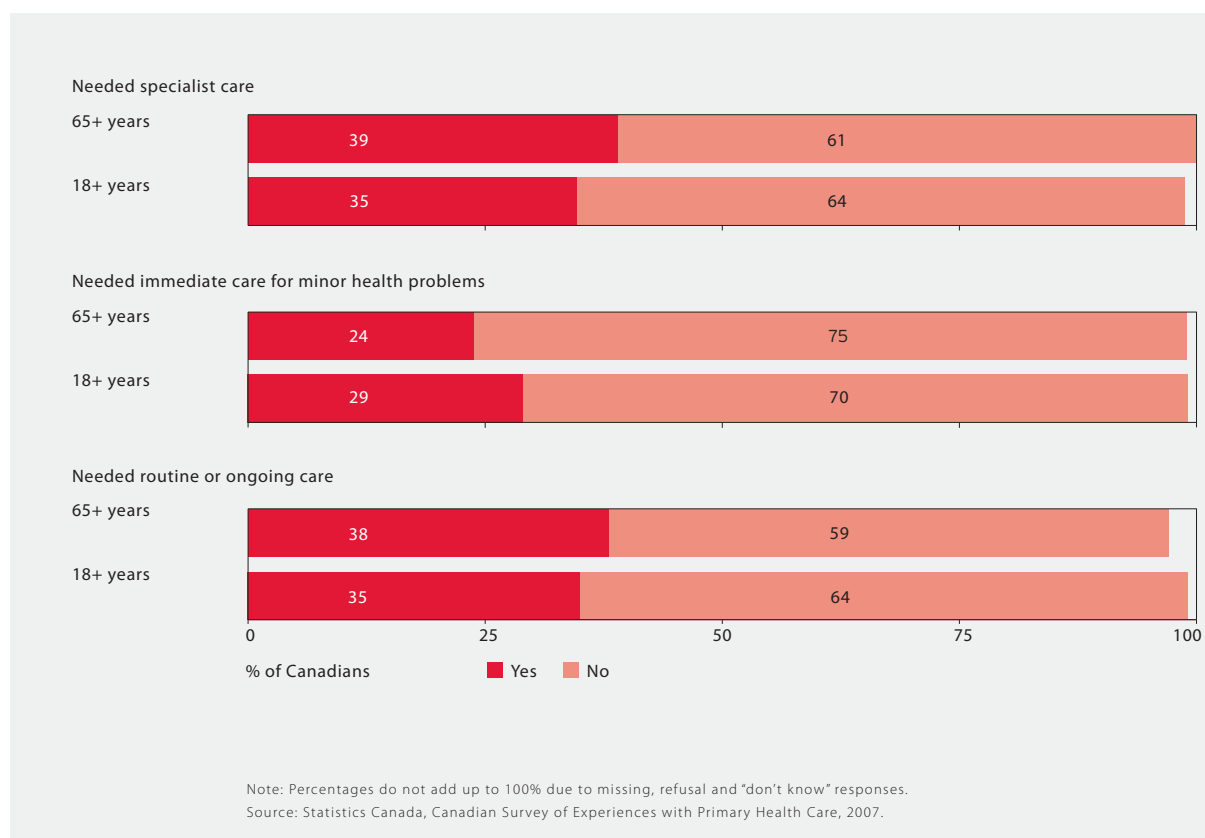
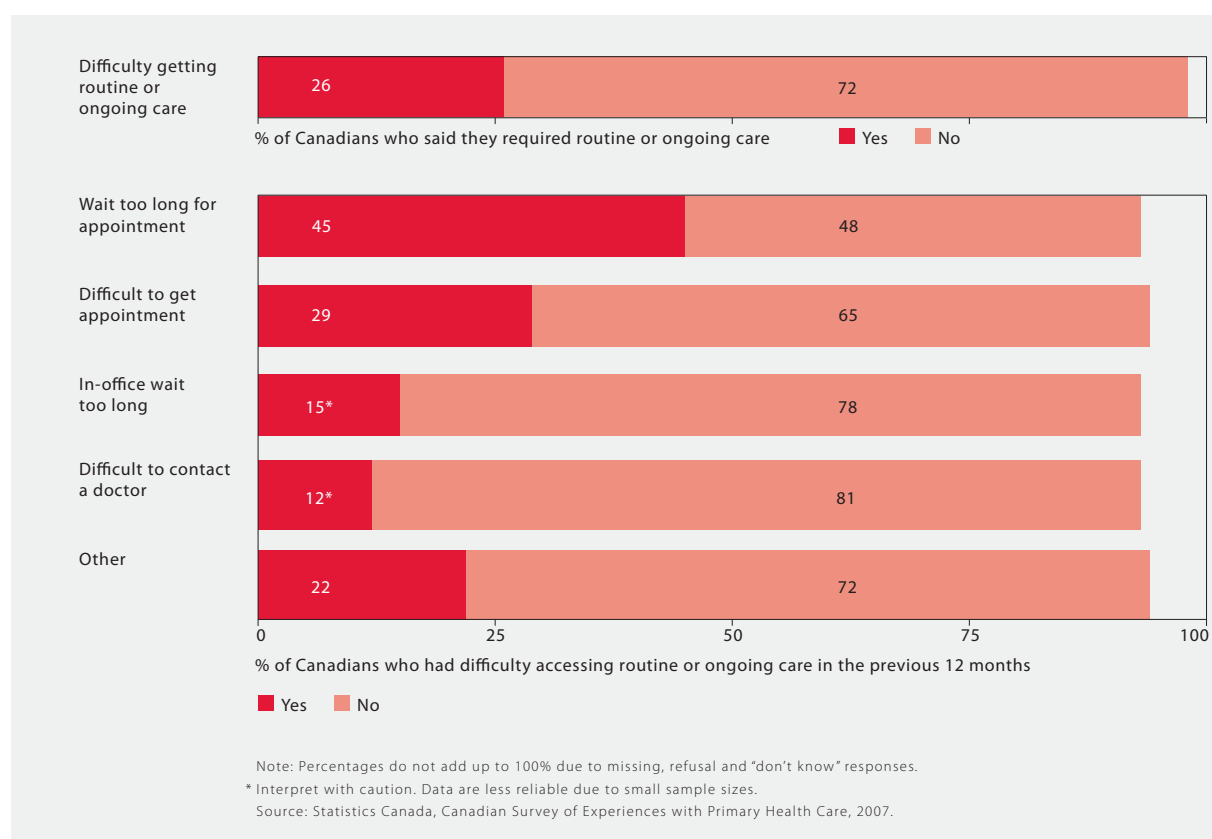
**Canadians' need for routine, immediate and specialist care in previous 12 months**

FIGURE 4

**Reasons for difficulty accessing routine or ongoing care**



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FIGURE 5

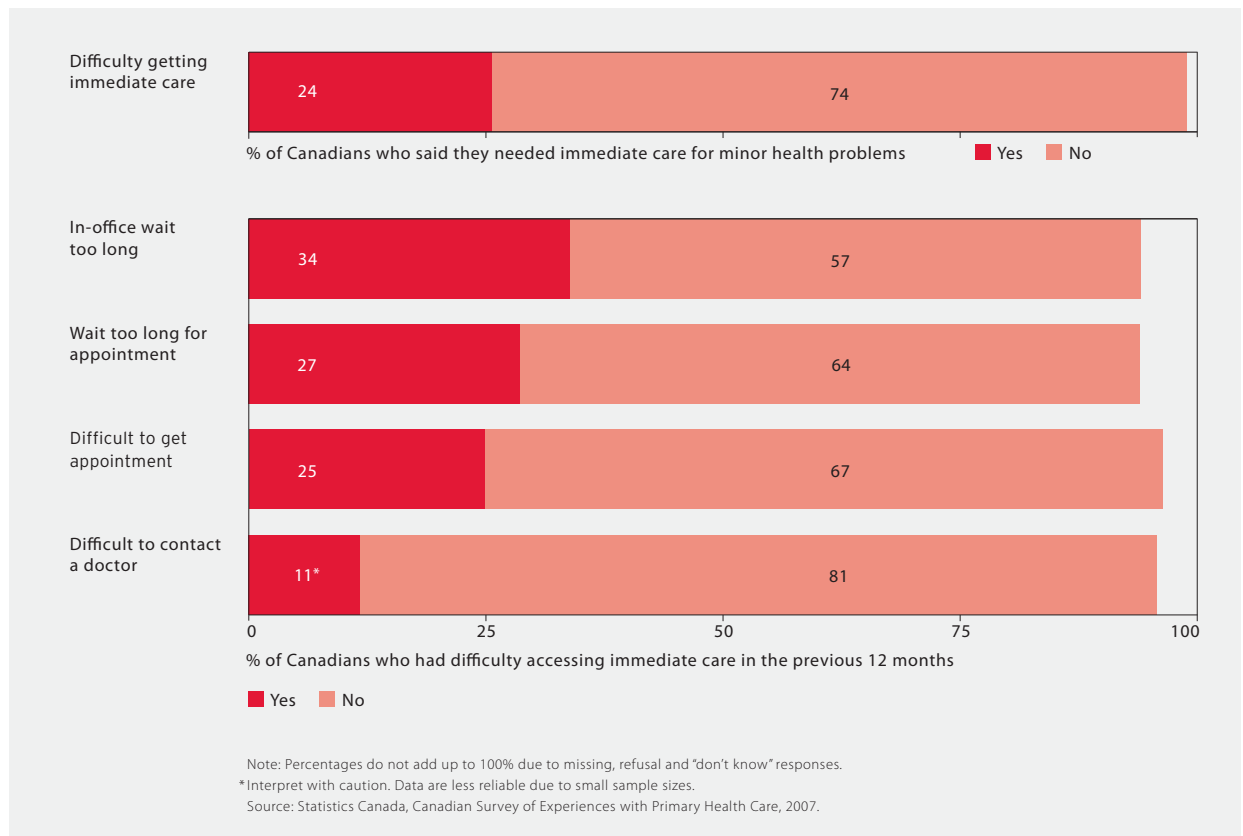
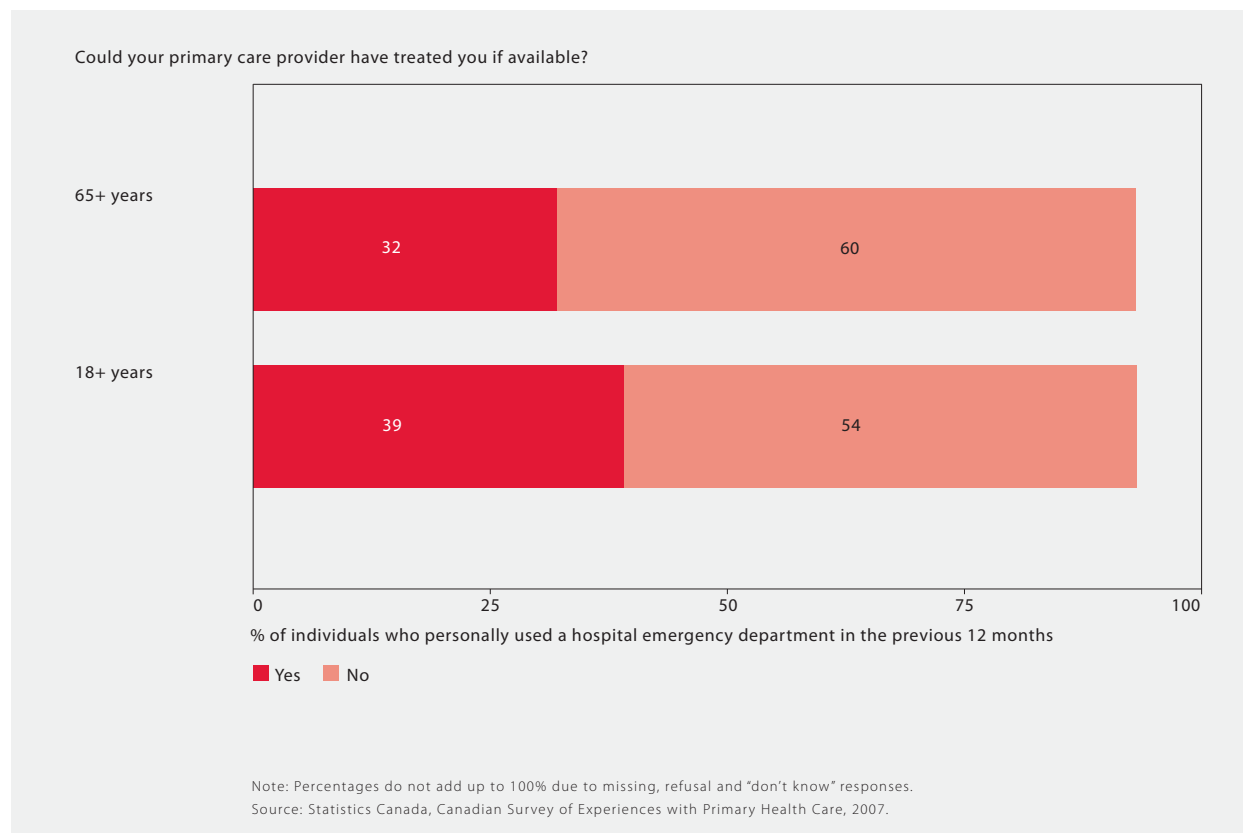
**Reasons for difficulty accessing immediate care for minor health problems**

FIGURE 6

**Visits to the emergency department for a condition that could have been dealt with by a primary health care provider**

## COMPREHENSIVENESS, CONTINUITY, AND COORDINATION OF CARE

Over half of adults (55%) and seniors (63%) who had a regular health care provider or place of care had been affiliated with their primary care provider or place for more than seven years. Few (18% of adults and 12% of seniors) report having been with their regular medical doctor or place of care for only 0-2 years (Figure 7).

The majority of adults (91%) as well as seniors (93%) with a regular health care provider or place of care agree or strongly agree that their primary care provider delivers a range of services that meets most or all of their primary health care needs.

Among those who visited a family or general practitioner at least once in the past 12 months, most adults (60%) and seniors (58%) report that their providers always take time to find out their concerns, and 67% of adults and seniors say their providers always take their concerns very seriously (Figure 8).

Among those who visited a family or general practitioner at least once in the past 12 months, many adults (35%) and seniors (32%) report that their primary care providers always help them to make changes in their habits or lifestyle that will improve health or prevent illness (Figure 9). For example, many adults (27%) and seniors (20%) report that their primary care providers always talk to them about specific things that they could do to improve their health or prevent illness such as quitting smoking, reducing alcohol consumption, exercising, and practising safer sex. Many adults (21%) and seniors (23%) report that their primary care providers always help them reach or maintain a healthy body weight; however, an equal number of Canadians report that their primary care providers rarely or never talk to them about activities they could do to improve their health (25% adults and 31% seniors) or reach or maintain a healthy body weight (21% adults and seniors) (Figure 9). And just over half of adult Canadians (57%)

and seniors (60%) who take prescription medication report that their providers always explain the side effects of medication prescribed; a smaller percentage of adults (35%) and seniors (39%) who take prescription medication report that their providers always review and discuss all the different medications they are using, including medications prescribed by other medical doctors. However, many report that this rarely or never occurs (38% adults and 36% seniors) (Figure 10).

More than half of the adults (54%) and seniors (60%) who visited a family or general practitioner at least once in the past 12 months say that their primary care provider never uses words that are hard to understand; 65% (74% seniors) report that their health care provider never speaks too fast; and most (71% seniors and adults) report that their health care provider always lets them say what they thought was important. Furthermore, over half of these individuals report that when a physical exam (55% adults; seniors 60%) or test (57% adults; seniors 66%) was conducted, the results were always clearly explained (Figure 11).

The majority of those who visited a family or general practitioner at least once in the past 12 months did not think they were given duplicate tests (92%) or received conflicting information (76%) from their primary care providers; 84% indicate that test results were available at the time of their doctor's appointment (Figure 12).

FIGURE 7  
Length of time with primary care provider

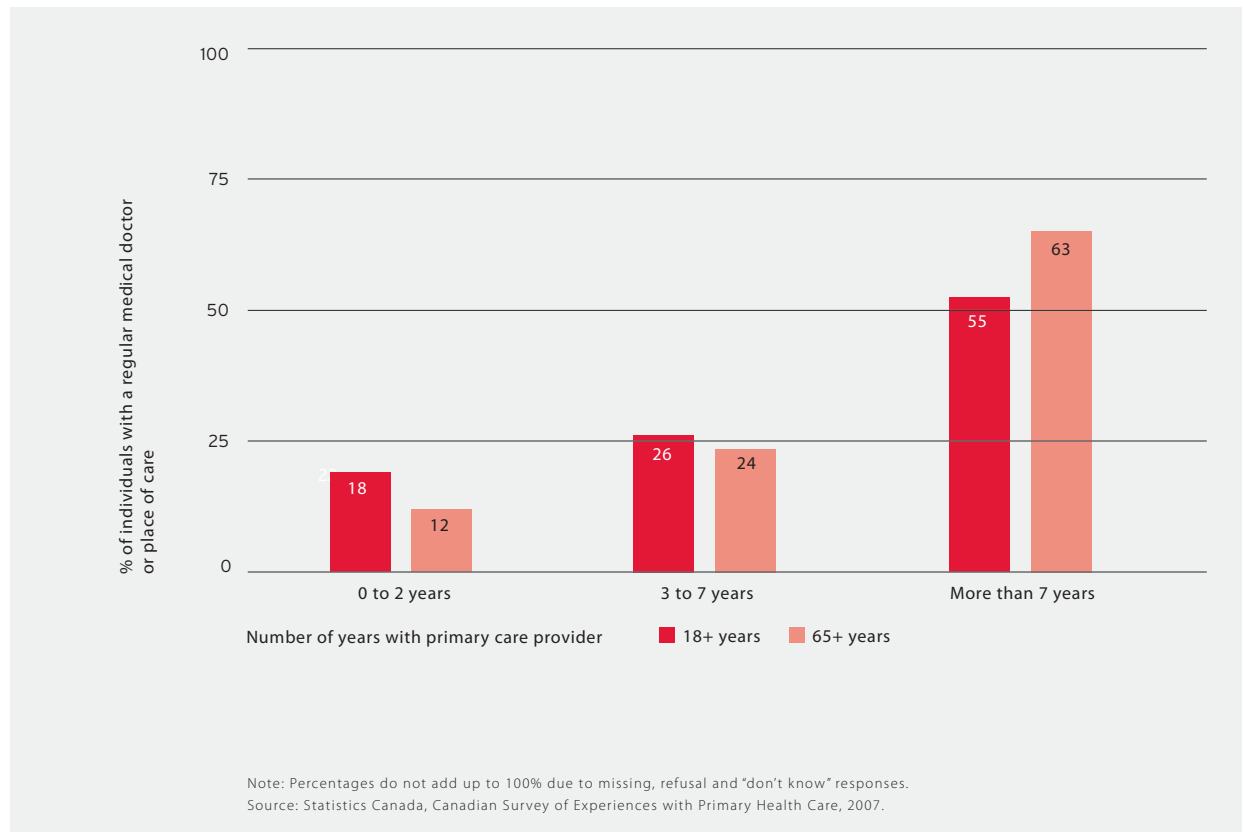


FIGURE 8  
Primary care provider's responsiveness to concerns

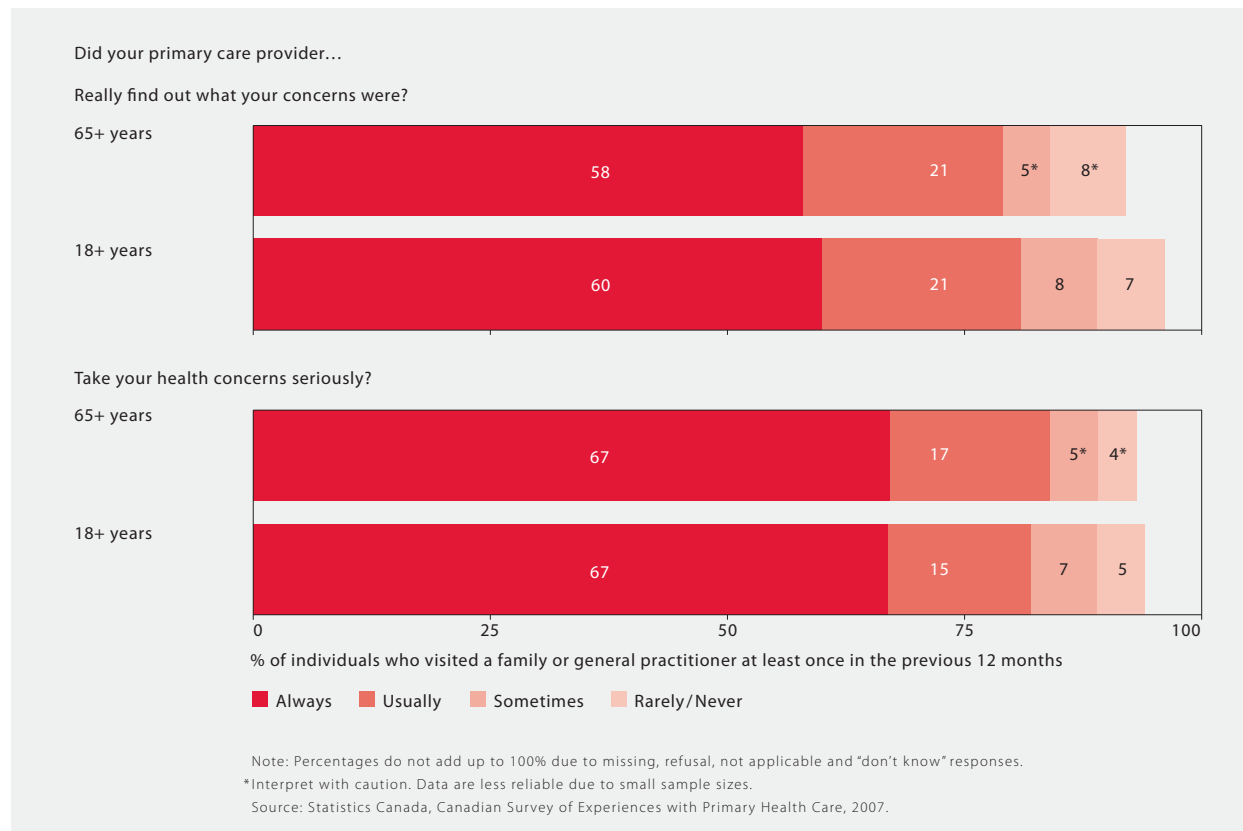


FIGURE 9

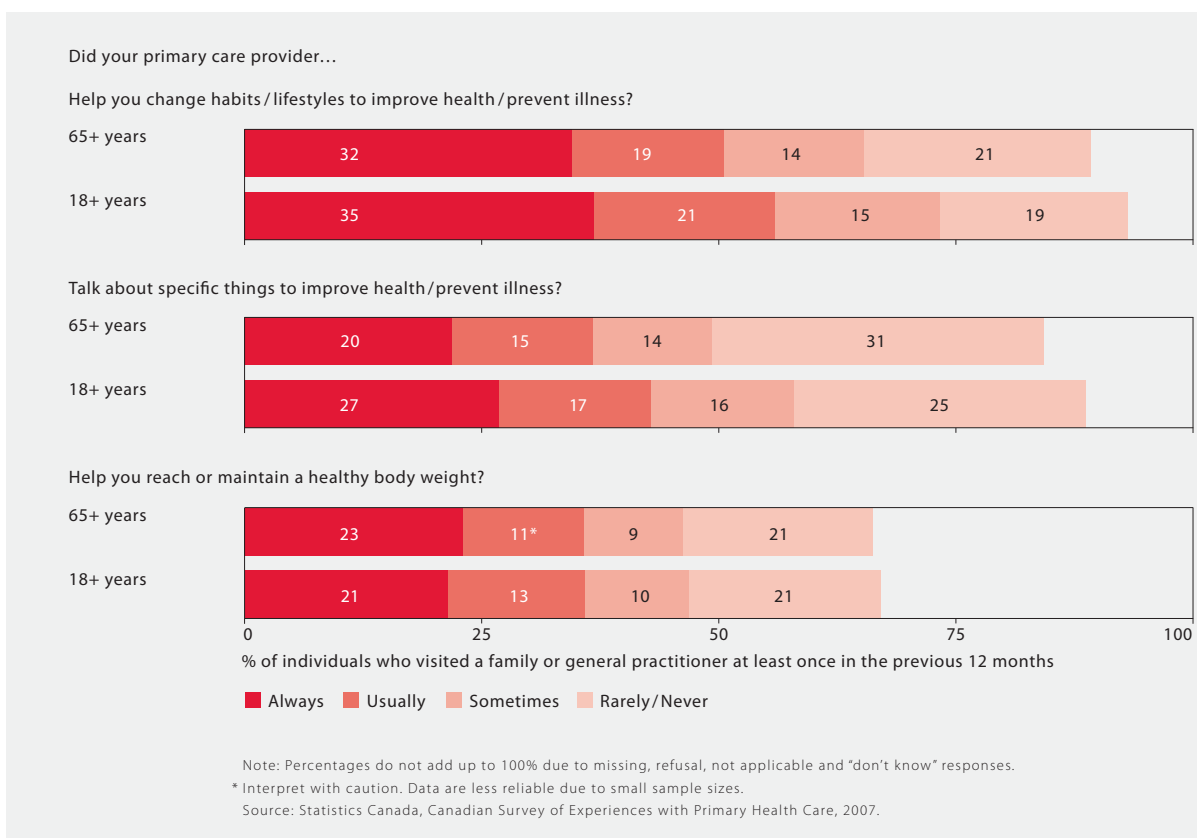
**Do primary care providers promote disease prevention and healthy living?**

FIGURE 10

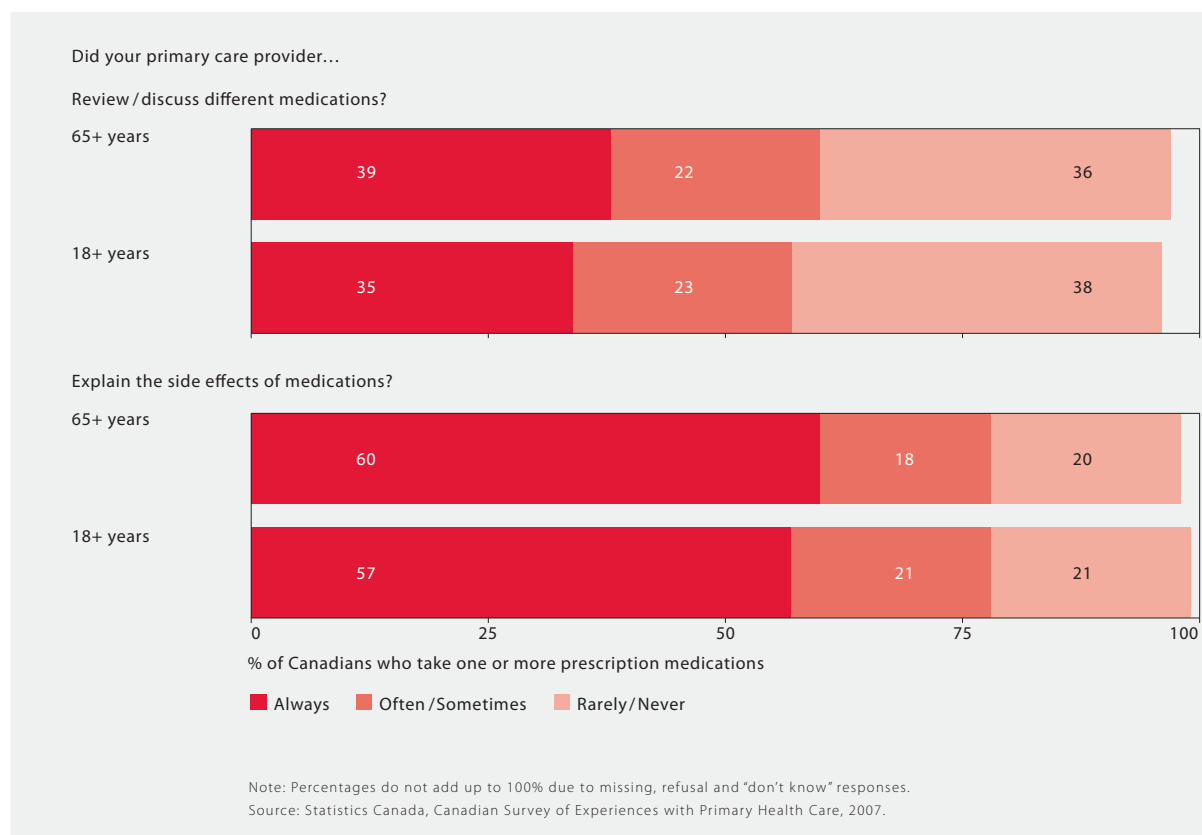
**Managing prescription medications**

FIGURE 11  
Communicating with your primary care provider

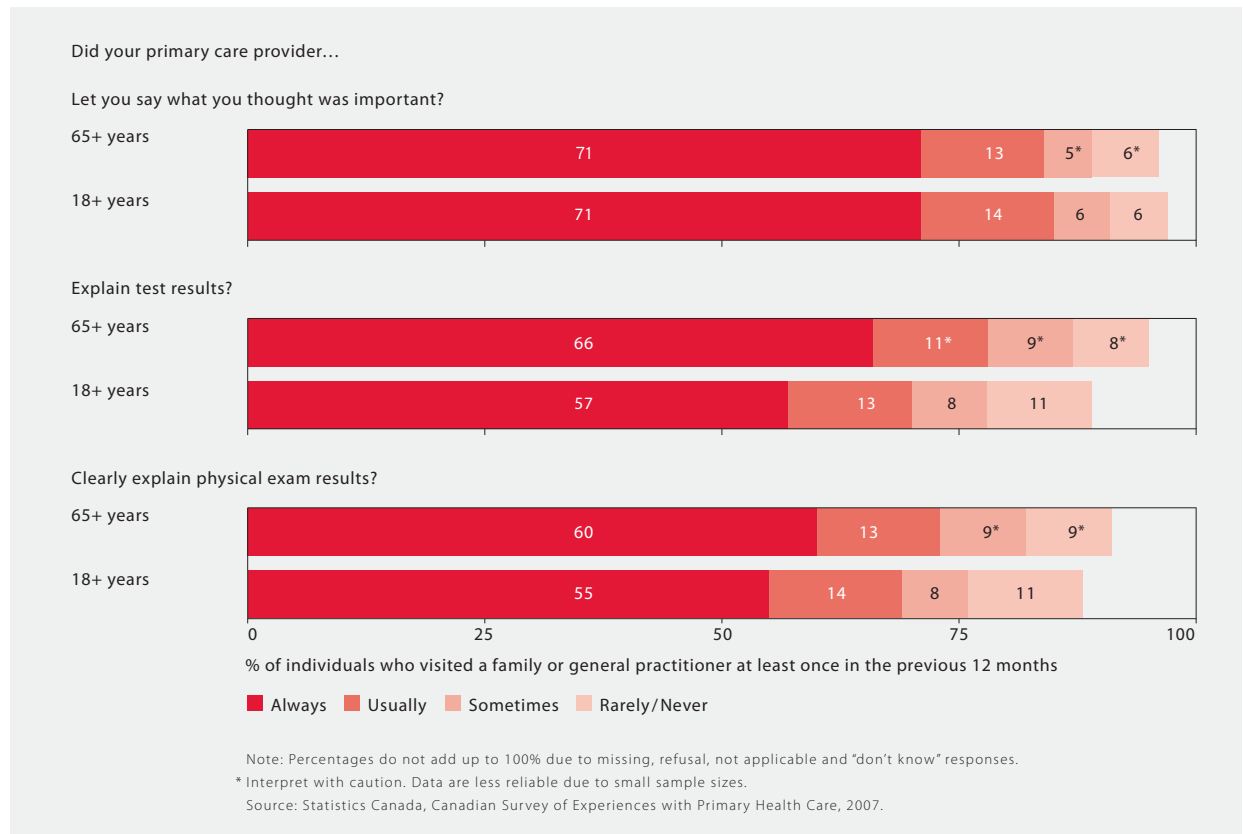
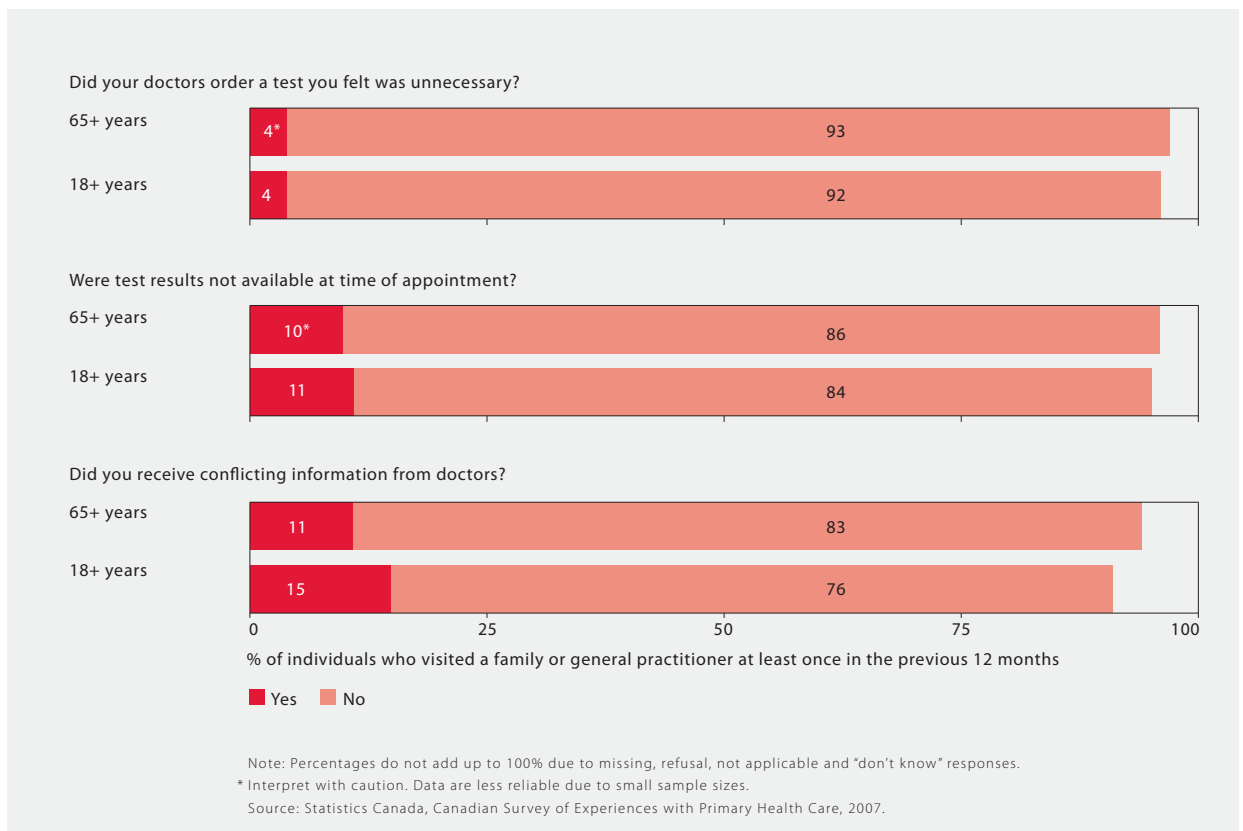


FIGURE 12  
Coordinating patient care



## HEALTH CARE MANAGEMENT

Among Canadians who have a regular medical doctor or place of care, the majority (89%) agree or strongly agree that their primary care provider works well with other health professionals at their regular place of care. Eighty-five per cent also agree or strongly agree that their regular providers seem to work well with other professionals such as pharmacists and physiotherapists, as well as other parts of the health care system such as hospitals and specialist offices (Figure 13).

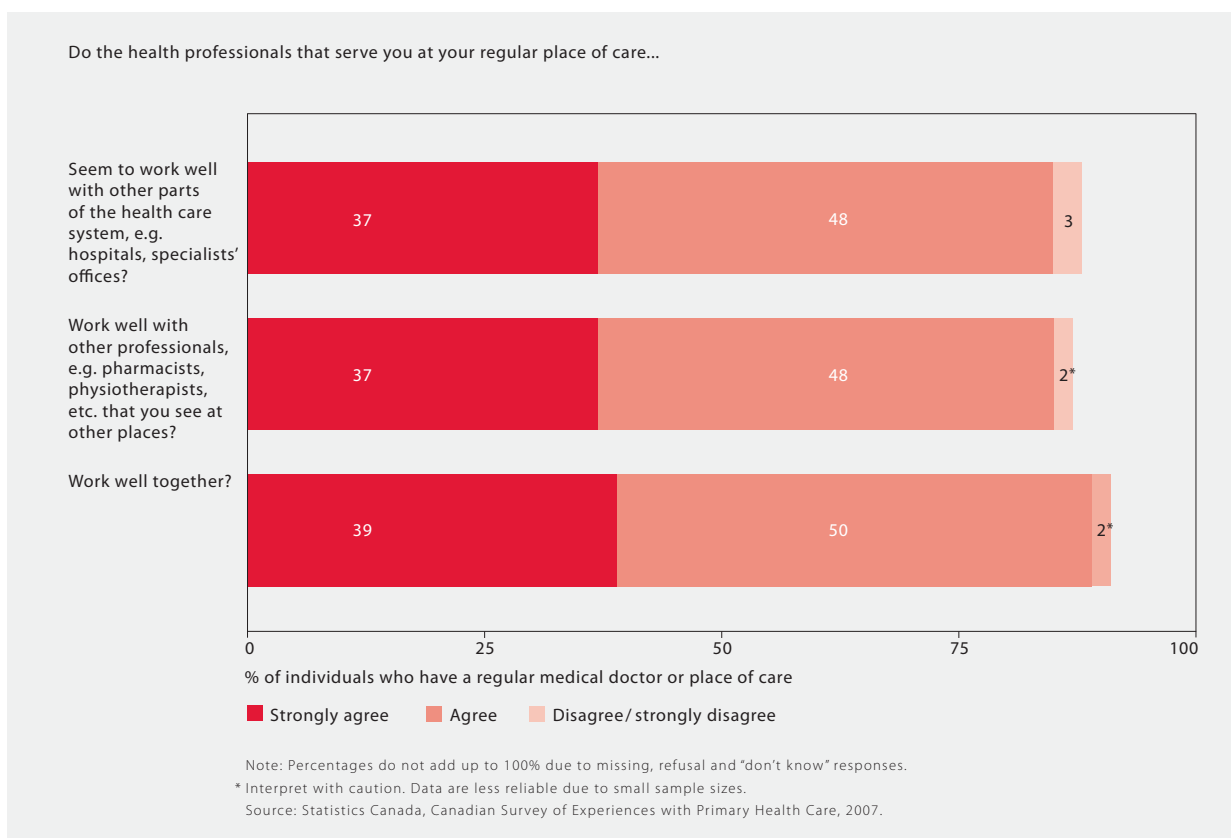
When those with a regular medical doctor or place of care were asked whether other health care providers work with their primary care provider, nearly one-third (30%) say a nurse works with their regular primary care provider and is regularly involved in their care. Fewer adults (17%) and seniors (15%) report that other health professionals such as dietitians and nutritionists work in the same office where they receive regular health care (Figure 14).

PERCEIVED QUALITY OF CARE AND  
CONFIDENCE IN CARE

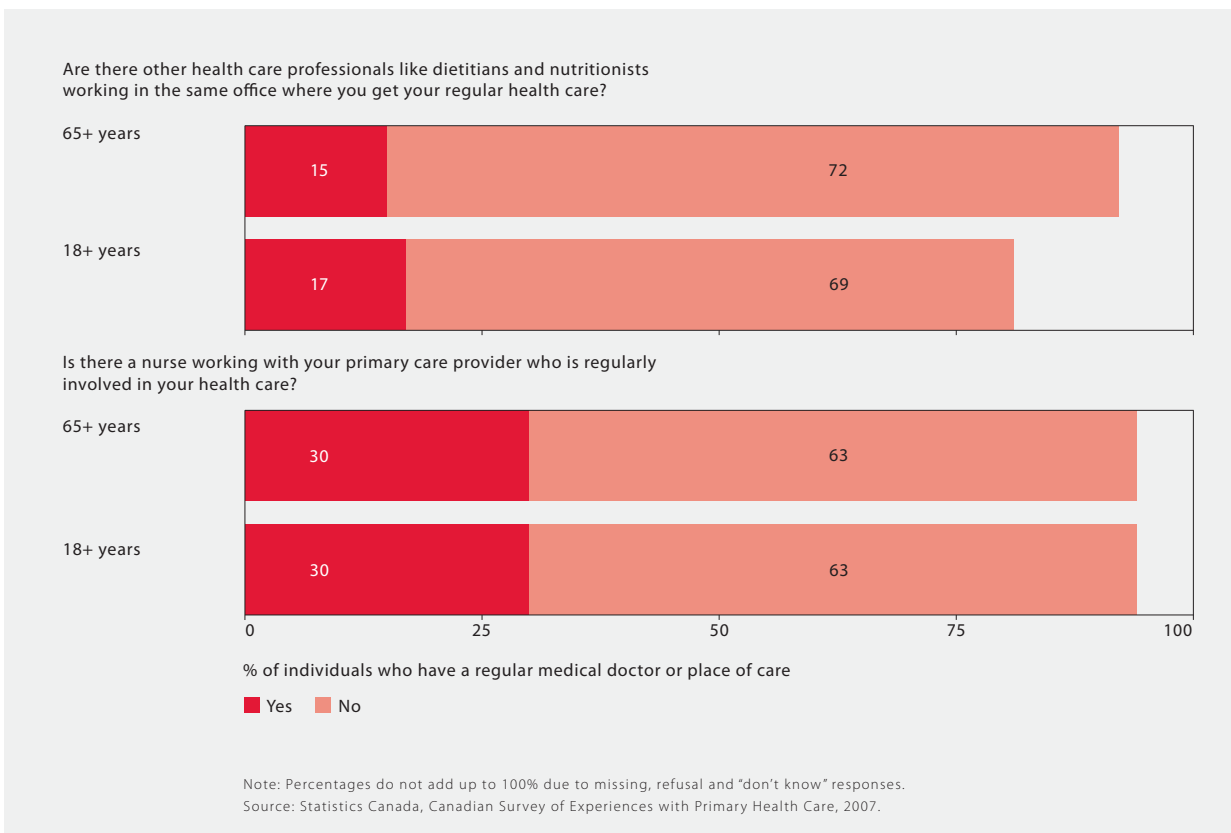
Most adults (73%) and the majority of seniors (81%) who visited a family or general practitioner at least once in the previous 12 months report that the quality of care they received from the primary care provider they rely on the most is either excellent or very good (Figure 15). The majority (71%) of individuals with a regular medical doctor or place of care would definitely recommend their primary care provider to a friend or relative.

Many Canadians (27% adults; seniors 40%) say they are very confident that they would get high-quality care that is safe if they needed it (Figure 16). However, many adult Canadians (33%) and seniors (36%) report that their overall confidence in the health care system is “falling” compared to a year ago (Figure 17).

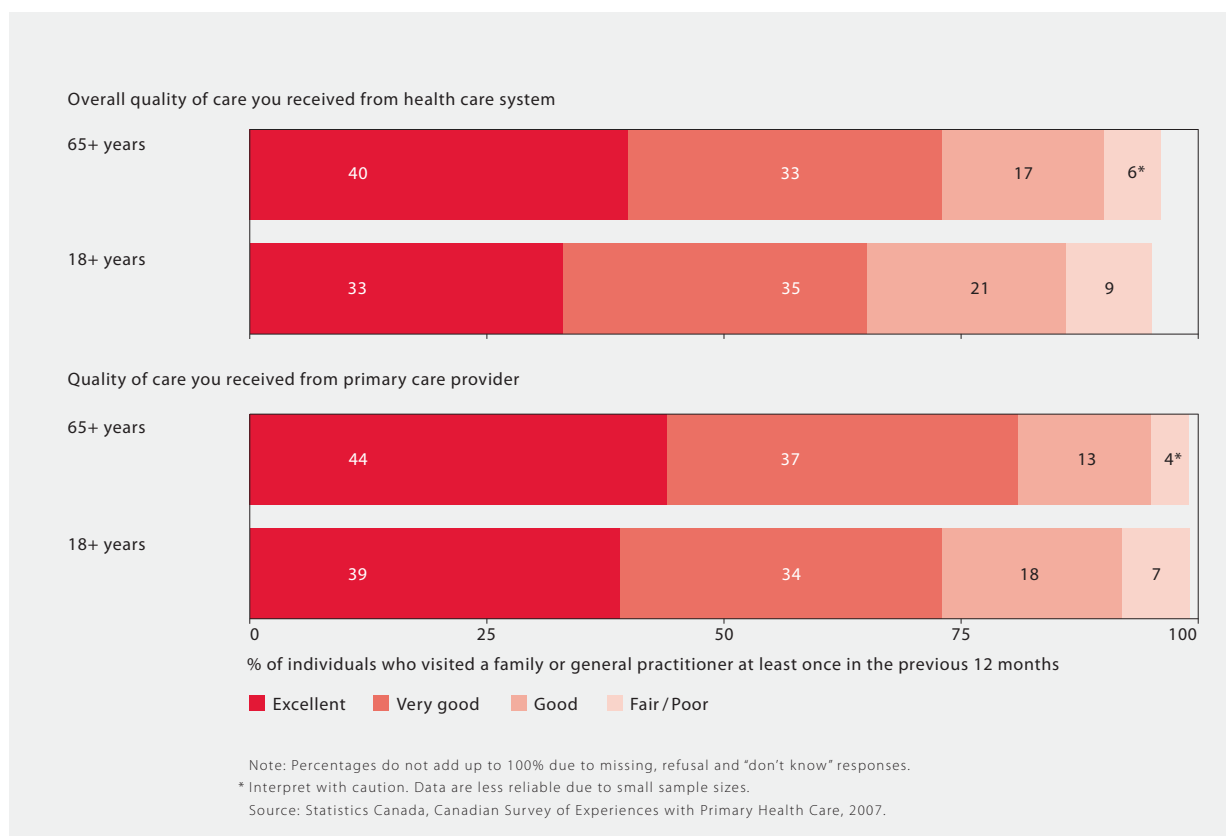
**FIGURE 13**  
**Health care provider interactions**



**FIGURE 14**  
**The involvement of other health professionals**



**FIGURE 15**  
**Quality of care**



**FIGURE 16**  
**Confidence in quality and safety**

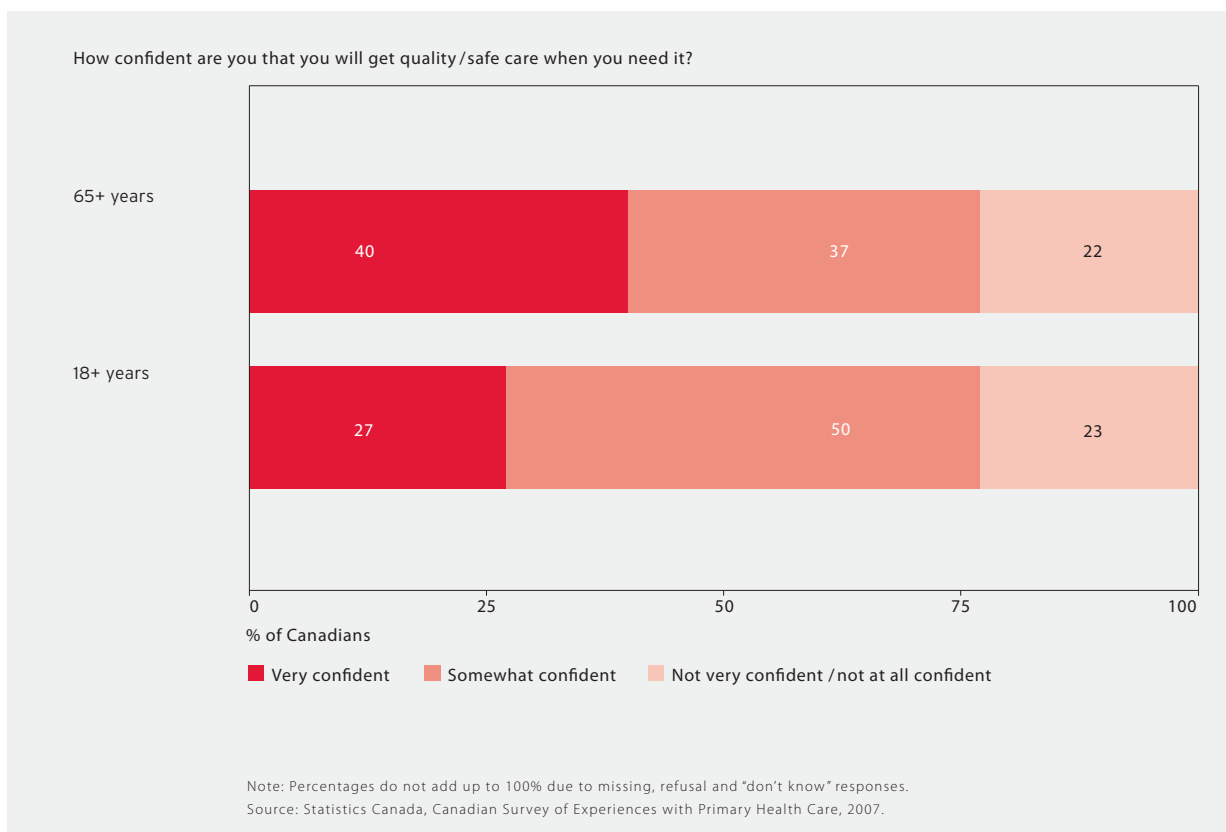
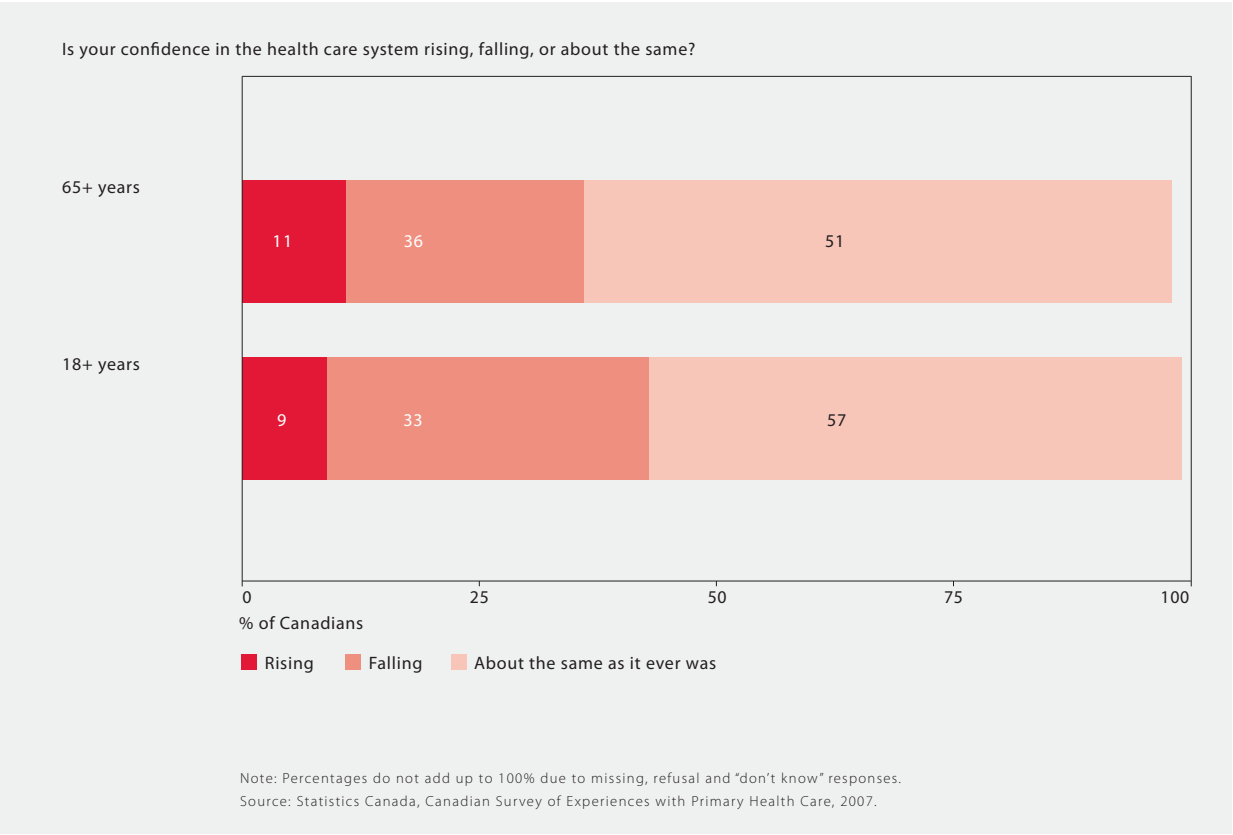




FIGURE 17  
Confidence in the health care system



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#### ABOUT THE HEALTH COUNCIL OF CANADA

Canada's First Ministers established the Health Council of Canada in the 2003 *Accord on Health Care Renewal* and enhanced our role in the 2004 *10-Year Plan to Strengthen Health Care*. We report on the progress of health care renewal, on the health status of Canadians, and on the health outcomes of our system. Our goal is to provide a system-wide perspective on health care reform for the Canadian public, with particular attention to accountability and transparency.

The participating jurisdictions have named Councillors representing each of their governments and also Councillors with expertise and broad experience in areas such as community care, Aboriginal health, nursing, health education and administration, finance, medicine and pharmacy. Participating jurisdictions include British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut and the federal government. Funded by Health Canada, the Health Council operates as an independent non-profit agency, with members of the corporation being the ministers of health of the participating jurisdictions.

#### The Council's vision

An informed and healthy Canadian public, confident in the effectiveness, sustainability and capacity of the Canadian health care system to promote their health and meet their health care needs.

#### The Council's mission

The Health Council of Canada fosters accountability and transparency by assessing progress in improving the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of the health care system. Through insightful monitoring, public reporting and facilitating informed discussion, the Council shines a light on what helps or hinders health care renewal and the well-being of Canadians.

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