Survey Finds Many Americans Have Taken Steps to Protect Themselves Against H1N1

Most Are Following News About the Outbreak Closely

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Boston, MA—As part of a series about Americans' response to the H1N1 flu outbreak, the Harvard Opinion Research Program at the Harvard School of Public Health has released a national poll which finds that many Americans have taken steps to protect themselves and their families against the disease. The polling was done on May 5-6, 2009.

For the complete poll and charts associated with this press release, go to:
http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/research/horp/project-on-the-public-response-to-h1n1/

Americans' Response

Two-thirds (67%) report that they or someone in their household has washed their hands or used hand sanitizer more frequently in response to reports about H1N1 flu, while a majority (55%) say they have made preparations to stay at home if they or a family member is sick. About one in four report that they or a household member have avoided air travel (27%) or avoided public places where many people are gathered together (25%). About one-third (35%) of Americans say they personally have taken steps to avoid being near someone who has flu-like symptoms. In addition, 14 percent report that they personally have stopped shaking hands with people, and 12 percent say they have stopped hugging and kissing close friends or relatives.

This is the second in a series of polls about Americans' response to the H1N1 flu outbreak. The first survey was released May 1, 2009.

Concerns about the outbreak

The survey finds that about six in ten Americans (61%) are not currently concerned that they or someone in their immediate family may get sick from H1N1 flu in the next 12 months. The proportion that does not express concern has risen from 53 percent last week. However, three-fourths (77%) say they are closely following news about the recent H1N1 flu outbreak, the same proportion as a week ago.

"The fact that most people continue to follow the news closely suggests that there is a lot of interest and uncertainty about the risk for themselves and their families over the next year," said Robert J. Blendon, Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Parents' concerns

Nearly half (48%) of parents of children under age 18 and currently enrolled in school are concerned that they or a family member will get sick from H1NI flu in the next 12 months. This level of concern is significantly higher than it is among people who do not have children in school (36%). Half (50%) of parents with children in school report that their schools have not given them any information about what they are doing to reduce the possible spread of H1N1 in the school.

"It might help allay parents' concerns if schools provided them with more information about what they are doing to reduce the risk of infection," said Blendon.

Satisfaction with public officials
Overall, Americans are satisfied with the performance of public health officials in the H1N1 outbreak. More than eight in ten Americans say they are satisfied with the way that public health officials have managed the response to the outbreak (83%) and with the information public health officials have been providing (88%).

Key trends
Recently public health officials made a decision to introduce the term "H1N1 virus." More than four in ten (43%) of Americans now say that they have heard the term and know it means the same thing as "swine flu." This proportion has more than doubled from 20 percent a week ago.

Perceptions of the availability of an effective medicine or vaccine against H1N1 could affect public response to the continuing outbreak. Nearly two-thirds (64%) believe that there is an effective medicine to treat the disease, up from 54 percent a week ago. Most Americans (66%) don't believe that there is a vaccine to prevent the disease, virtually unchanged from a week ago (65%).

Currently 48 percent of Americans believe that wearing a face mask will protect them from getting H1N1 flu, down from 53 percent a week ago. About three-fourths (78%) believe that wearing a face mask when sick will prevent them from spreading H1N1 flu to others, the same proportion as a week ago.

Methodology
This is the 30th in a series of studies on the public and biological security by the Harvard Opinion Research Program (HORP) at Harvard School of Public Health. The study was designed and analyzed by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH). The project director is Robert J. Blendon of the Harvard School of Public Health. The research team also includes John M. Benson, Gillian K. SteelFisher, and Kathleen J. Weldon of the Harvard School of Public Health, and Melissa J. Herrmann of SSRS/ICR. Fieldwork was conducted via telephone (including both landline and cell phone) for HORP by SSRS/ICR of Media (PA) on May 5-6, 2009.

The survey was conducted with a representative national sample of 1,013 adults age 18 and over, including oversamples of non-Hispanic African Americans and Hispanics. Altogether 112 non-Hispanic African Americans and 130 Hispanics were interviewed. In the overall results, these groups were weighted to their actual proportion of the total adult population.

The margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 3.6 percentage points. Possible sources of non-sampling error include non-response bias, as well as question wording and ordering effects. Non-response in telephone surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population. To compensate for these known biases, sample data are weighted to the most recent Census data available from the Current Population Survey for gender, age, race, education, region, and number of adults in the household. Other techniques, including random-digit dialing, replicate

subsamples, and systematic respondent selection within households, are used to ensure that the sample is representative.

Funding
This Harvard School of Public Health series is funded under a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The award enables HORP to provide technical assistance to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as well as to other national and state government health officials in order to support two critical goals: (1) to better understand the general public's response to public health emergencies, including biological threats and natural disasters; and (2) to improve related public health communications.