

Survey finds nearly half of Americans concerned they or their family may get sick from swine flu

May 1 2009

Following the declaration of a public health emergency due to the new H1N1 virus, also known as swine flu, the Harvard Opinion Research Program at the Harvard School of Public Health conducted a poll about how concerned Americans are about the outbreak, how they are responding and what they believe about transmission, prevention and treatment.

Concerns about the outbreak

The survey finds that nearly half of Americans are concerned (46%) that they or someone in their immediate family may get sick from swine flu during the next 12 months.

Americans' response to the outbreak

More than half of Americans are responding to the outbreak by washing their hands or using hand sanitizer more frequently (59%), and a quarter are avoiding places where many people are gathered, like sporting events, malls or public transportation (25%). Some Americans have also responded in other ways: avoiding people who they thought may have recently traveled to Mexico (20%), avoiding Mexican restaurants or stores (17%), wearing a face mask (8%), buying a face mask (5%), talking with their doctor about health issues related to swine flu (5%), or getting a prescription for antiviral medications (1%). Only a small

number (4%) of parents have kept their children home from school or daycare.

"It is a good sign that most people, though not all, are taking the most important precaution recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to prevent the spread of swine flu: washing their hands," said Robert J. Blendon, Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Beliefs about swine flu

An overwhelming majority of Americans believe that they can get the current swine flu from being in close contact with someone who has it (83%), and few believe that they can get the disease from eating pork (13%). Some Americans also believe that they can get the swine flu from being near, but not in close contact with, someone with swine flu (29%), or from being in contact with pigs (34%).

Americans are less certain about prevention and medicine for swine flu. Just over half believe that there is an effective medicine to treat the disease (54%). Most Americans (65%) don't believe that there is a vaccine to prevent the disease. About half of Americans (53%) believe that wearing a face mask could prevent them from getting sick from the swine flu, while more than three-quarters (78 percent) believe that wearing a face mask when sick would help keep them from getting others sick.

"In the days ahead it's important that public health officials explain more clearly what can be done to effectively treat those who are ill, so the public can better understand the choices that are available if they or a family member become sick," said Blendon.

Awareness of "H1N1" versus "swine flu"

The term "swine flu" has been widely used in the media to describe the current [outbreak](#); however, recently some public health officials have used the term "H1N1 virus." The survey found that the majority of Americans (55%) have not heard of the term "H1N1" virus. Only one in five (20%) think it means the same thing as [swine flu](#).

Methodology

This is the 29th 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 April 29, 2009.

The survey was conducted with a representative national sample of 1,067 adults age 18 and over, including oversamples of non-Hispanic African Americans and Hispanics. Altogether 130 non-Hispanic African Americans and 107 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 and systematic respondent selection within households, are used to ensure that the sample is representative.

Source: Harvard School of [Public Health](#) ([news](#) : [web](#))

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