

# Swine flu having powerful impact on us

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The new influenza A (H1N1), known as the swine flu, demonstrates the power of people's perceptions of risk. Sales of face masks are breaking all records not only in Mexico but also in Sweden. Hotel guests are being isolated at a hotel in Hong Kong, and people with the sniffles are being isolated in airports around the world. But before the outbreak of the flu, this was a risk that extremely few Swedes perceived as a serious threat to themselves.

Before the [outbreak](#) of the flu in Mexico, few Swedes were concerned about pandemics, previously unknown diseases, or diseases related to animals, such as [mad cow disease](#) or BSE. This is shown in the national questionnaire-based study Society and Values (SaV), with 1,500 participants. The study was performed last winter by the KRIHS research team at Mid Sweden University.

"The results show that it is difficult to predict what risks will have an impact on public opinion," says Susanna Öhman, associate professor of sociology and head of the Department of Social Sciences. "There are certain differences across groups," she continues. "If you live in a city you will be more worried than if you live in the country. People of foreign origin are also more concerned. Highly educated people, however, are less anxious than those with little education. In terms of both origin and education, the results accord with previous studies and other types of risks. The difference between city and country is more unusual and may be due to the fact that those living in cities have more contacts with others outside the private sphere."

How is it that something that extremely few perceive as a risk one day can get Swedes to empty the stores of face masks the next day?

"There's no single answer to that question," says Anna Olofsson, associate professor of sociology and coordinator of KRIHS research. The obvious answer is that an entirely new type of influenza appeared that actually can lead to a [pandemic](#), and that is frightening. At the same time there are many other diseases and risks that are also extremely dangerous, killing many people across the world. A further explanatory factor is that the new [influenza](#) is also a risk that is rapidly amplified in society. This is done when the mass media, the general public, experts, politicians, and authorities draw attention to the risk in various ways.

Source: Swedish Research Council ([news](#) : [web](#))

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