

Swine flu -- were people in the UK ever really that concerned?

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Three quarters of European people surveyed between the 30th April and 6th May 2009 said they were either not at all concerned or only a little concerned about swine flu. Researchers writing in the open access journal *BMC Infectious Diseases* surveyed people in Europe and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, about their responses to initial reports about the outbreak.

Robin Goodwin, from Brunel University, Uxbridge, UK, worked with a team of researchers to question people about [swine flu](#) in the week after the WHO [pandemic](#) alert level 5. He said, "Our data suggest that individuals underestimate the threat of regular seasonal flu. Despite major media and governmental campaigns across Europe, there is obviously still a need for greater information with respect to symptomology and immunization".

The research team interviewed 148 European people via an online questionnaire and 180 people in Kuala Lumpur using paper copies of the questionnaire. When asked whether they would reduce their use of public transport, 48% of Malaysians said yes, compared to 22% of Europeans. While European people perceived the elderly and those with weakened immunity to be most at risk, Malaysians also believed that homosexuals, prostitutes and farmers were at relatively high risk. According to Goodwin, "During pandemics, particular 'out-groups' may be vulnerable to discrimination. Political and health authorities need to be wary of increased stereotyping and prejudice towards such groups".

Goodwin concludes that, although unrealistically optimistic beliefs can reduce our willingness to enact healthy behaviors, opinions did reflect generally approved [public health](#) measures. He said, "Respondents correctly identified 'washing hands', avoidance of infected people and avoidance of crowded areas as strategies for avoiding infection".

More information: Initial psychological responses to Influenza A, H1N1 ("Swine flu"), Robin Goodwin, Shamsul Haque, Felix Neto and Lynn B Myers, *BMC [Infectious Diseases](#)* (in press), www.biomedcentral.com/bmcinfectdis/

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