

Australians 'do the right thing' when following COVID-19 advice

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Australians showed a high level of compliance during the peak of the COVID-19 emergency despite only one in five perceiving a high risk to their health, a survey led by UNSW Sydney experts has found. The researchers say that if governments and health authorities want support to remain high, the rationale behind the messaging about hygiene and

social distancing strategies needs to be clear.

In a paper published today in prestigious scientific journal *PLOS ONE*, the authors surveyed the attitudes and beliefs of 1420 Australians toward the COVID-19 pandemic at the peak of the outbreak between March 18 and 24. In particular, the researchers were interested in the willingness and capacity of the public to engage with community mitigation strategies.

Lead author Dr. Holly Seale, who is a [social scientist](#) with UNSW Medicine's School of Public Health and Community Medicine, says that while 50 percent of respondents were not too worried about the threat of COVID-19 to their personal health, more than 90 percent of respondents said they'd actively changed their behavior to help stop the spread of the virus to others.

"We looked at both the adoption of hygiene related strategy—such as washing your hands, covering your cough or sneeze—as well as strategies we defined as avoidance-related behaviors, like staying away from public areas, staying away from work, avoiding public transport and postponing events," she says.

"We found—somewhat surprisingly—really good compliance with both the hygiene related behaviors and the avoidance related behaviors at that time point. Some factors that influenced whether or not people would adopt those strategies were related to things like whether or not they trusted the government and what was being proposed, whether they felt that those behaviors would have an impact on reducing their risk, and whether or not people thought that they actually had the capacity to adopt those strategies."

It turns out that, when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in government and [health authorities](#) was found to be very high, with just

under 94 percent displaying faith in the recommendations made by lawmakers and health professionals.

Does this mean the often-romanticized view of Australians having a natural distrust of authority is waning?

Dr. Seale says the [survey results](#) suggest Australians may be more strongly motivated by a sense of social responsibility than blind adherence to rules and regulations.

"This survey showed that people thought it was important to be a socially responsible person and that they wanted to conform with what was now being perceived as a social norm—like adopting the 1.5 meter rule. It also reveals that people saw themselves playing a role in adopting these new behaviors for the moral good. For example, when asked what would motivate them to comply with a social distancing strategy, participants' most common response was 'I believe it is the right thing to do.'"

The researchers say future compliance could be maintained or even further improved if governments were clear about why people needed to follow behavioral recommendations—to take the community beyond "doing the right thing."

Dr. Seale says, "We think we need to prime people about what additional strategies may still need to be introduced. This could mean talking with them about why the [strategy](#) would be implemented, the end-goal of implementing it, and talking about the potential impact. We'd also recommend using realistic portrayals—such as community stories—and role modeling by influential actors in social networks, as well as media campaigns that foster awareness of the recommended behaviors and encourage people to share their strategies for self-isolating and working from home."

She says even in the short time since the survey was conducted at the peak of the pandemic, the COVID-19 curve has largely flattened and there is now a move towards relaxing restrictions. But she sees the survey as more than just a one-off, with value in carrying out follow-up surveys to gauge changes in attitudes and behavior.

"We need to understand a little bit more about how the social norms influence behavior, how things like empathy play a role, and what are going to be the the drivers that will influence people's readiness to adopt a new behavior," she says. "Knowing and understanding these motivations will help us inform a campaign around the potential new vaccine that could come out. That's where we need to really be shifting our work now: looking at how we can channel these high levels of trust and these high levels of adoptive behaviors early on in the pandemic, and ensure that we can replicate that when when it comes to actually delivering a campaign for a vaccine and other COVID-19 strategies."

Other survey findings:

- 38% respondents increased the time spent disinfecting things they were likely to touch
- 77% increased hand-washing frequency
- 56% used hand sanitiser more frequently
- 45% canceled or postponed a social event
- 50% canceled or delayed traveling overseas
- 51% reduced their use of public transport
- 67% kept away from crowded places generally
- 85% performed one or more of three recommended hygiene behaviors
- 94% performed one or more of six avoidance behaviors

More information: Holly Seale et al. COVID-19 is rapidly changing: Examining public perceptions and behaviors in response to this evolving

pandemic, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0235112](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0235112)

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