

# **COVID-19 awareness and understanding among the public has increased, while skepticism declined, researchers report**

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When sweeping lockdowns changed nearly every aspect of daily life in March, the world sat up and took notice of the novel coronavirus. Since

then, terms such as social distancing, aerosols, asymptomatic, and superspreaders have become common parlance.

And the [general public](#) has begun paying attention to news about testing and vaccine development and trusting science and scientists much more than the pre-COVID-19 era, a 3M report on the state of science found.

Surveying more than 1,000 people in 14 countries before the pandemic, then again in 11 countries during the pandemic, 3M researchers found that trust in science has increased to a three-year high. Skepticism has decreased well below pre-pandemic levels to 28%—politics notwithstanding.

Veteran scientists from different San Diego State University colleges found this to be largely true among their own circles of family and friends, and amidst the public. Each weighed in on how to build on this trust going forward.

## **Increased trust expected**

As an epidemiologist and infectious disease physician, public health professor Dr. Stephanie Brodine has a combined expertise directly related to disease outbreaks.

"I have definitely seen a shift in health literacy among my friends, family and neighbors," Brodine said. "They want to know about mutations of the virus and aerosols. Knowledge is power, and it's how you protect yourself and your family. There's an urgency to this that we didn't see even in the early days of HIV. The pace is astounding."

It's because COVID-19 has given rise to economic, social and health threats, and the science keeps evolving every week. Brodine observed that people are sharing scientific information at unprecedented levels,

across disciplines and nations.

"Our new cohort of students and our graduates know they're part of the effort in keeping the community safe and that's very rewarding to witness," she said.

And many more people now know what an epidemiologist does.

"It's quite predictable," said mechanical engineering professor Sam Kassegne, deputy director of the NSF-Center for NeuroTechnology, whose research expertise is in brain computer interface. "We've always had viruses, we've had pandemics in the past and we will have them in the future. This one stopped everyone. It affects our children's education and our work, so they paid attention."

He was surprised the report did not show even lower skepticism and more trust, but predicted that by the time the pandemic is over, there would be much higher trust in science.

## **Politicization of science**

"Where we get resistance is when people see the impact of science on policy, that's when denial comes in," Kassegne explained. "So it's not that they don't trust the data, more that they may not want to accept it."

Conservation ecologist and biology professor Rebecca Lewison concurred, observing that COVID-19 has demonstrated that through coordinated action, daunting challenges can be tackled efficiently. This is a lesson she hopes will be taken from the COVID-19 pandemic and applied to tackling [climate change](#), an equally urgent concern affecting the planet.

"This idea of science in service is central to my approach to research.

People now realize without science, we are sunk," Lewison said. "The biggest shift I'm hearing from family and community members is the recognition that we need leaders who embrace science and use science to address the crises we are facing and will continue to face."

People are listening much more now to trusted public figures and experts, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). But the public's memory is short, so this trust may not last that long, said Heather Canary, professor and director of the SDSU School of Communication, who specializes in organizational, family and health communication.

"What we are seeing now will be very different from five years from now when it's a whole different world," Canary explained. "Neighbors have said to me they're trying to figure out who to trust and some didn't think they could trust the CDC, so science has become politicized in an unprecedented way."

## **Cultural shifts in science**

The 3M report also spotlighted how things have been changing in the lab and in the field, with STEM innovations in the classroom that nurture the next generation of scientists, increased educational access, and a strong culture of collaboration.

"A single scientist working alone in the lab is not how we work now, and the report highlighted changes that reflect the type of research that many of us at SDSU already lead," Lewison said. "SDSU is known for its culture of collaboration, and as a campus we've demonstrated how team science can tackle so many problems."

General education classes now recognize that not all students will become scientists, but they need to have a level of scientific literacy to

understand what's going on in the world.

"As a campus, we contribute to science literacy because our graduates leave as critical thinkers who understand the need for science to help us navigate the future, whether that includes disease outbreaks or sustainable climate solutions," Lewison explained.

## **Building on this trust**

Increased investments and research in [renewable energy](#) have already led to shifts in the sources of energy that states such as California use, and engineering researcher Kassegne hopes this trust is sustainable so it can spark more excitement in renewables and space exploration.

"If it's sustained, it will increase the funding allocated for STEM education and advanced research," Kassegne said. "But we need more data points for that to happen. This is one milestone, one data point. It's a good trend in the right direction, but we will need to see more of this to have a real impact."

Epidemiologist Brodine believes we can build on this trust because the pandemic was not just a blip on people's radar. She expects there will be a lot more interest in other infectious disease threats, so this may change how stakeholders approach clinical trials in the future.

Social scientist and communication expert Canary also thinks the increased trust in health science could spill over to climate science and other global concerns such as water shortage, but will need strong storytelling that helps people connect with those areas.

"People won't remember if it's just a bunch of numbers, but if it's someone's story, that's how you can turn the tide and leverage this increased trust," Canary said. "The problem with [science](#) communication

is that it is often difficult for the public to understand. Making it accessible is how we increase public [trust](#)."

**More information:** State of Science Index Survey:  
[www.3m.com/3M/en\\_US/state-of-science-index-survey/](http://www.3m.com/3M/en_US/state-of-science-index-survey/)

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