

Survey Finds Less Swine Flu Fear
Published On 5/10/2009 10:33:57 PM

By HELEN X. YANG
Crimson Staff Writer

Americans' concerns about catching the H1N1 swine flu have decreased substantially over the past week, though more people have been taking action to protect themselves, according to a Harvard School of Public Health survey released Friday.

The survey, conducted by the Harvard Opinion Research Program at HSPH, is the first comprehensive nation-wide survey that polls the reactions, beliefs, level of alarm about the outbreak.

Results were announced through the Center for Disease Control, which funds the survey, as part of the CDC's daily update on swine flu.

This is the second HSPH survey on Americans' response to the outbreak. The first was released on May 1—just days after the first confirmed death from swine flu in the United States.

The most recent survey found that about 60 percent of Americans are no longer concerned that the H1N1 flu will reach them or their immediate family in the next year, a 53 percent increase from last week's poll.

“There's still uncertainty of what direction the swine flu could take,” said Robert J. Blendon, a professor at HSPH and director of the survey program. “But Americans are following the news closely, that's for sure”.

Of the populations surveyed, parents with children under 18 years old in school remain the most concerned. Half the parents reported not receiving any information from the schools regarding the steps they are taking to reduce the possible spread of the flu.

According to Blendon, the survey aimed to gather information on how people respond to crisis so that public officials can be more effective. Knowing that nearly half of parents with young children in

school are still concerned, school officials could relay more information about their responses to allay the parents' fears, Blendon said.

Though the survey showed an increase in awareness about the H1N1 flu, it also revealed several areas in which Americans still lacked knowledge.

For example, many people were not aware of the CDC's recent decision to change the name of the disease from "swine flu" to "H1N1 virus," a third of Americans erroneously believed a vaccine against the virus is available, and a third were unaware that there are anti-viral drugs to treat the flu.

The survey also found that more than half of Americans are taking action to lessen their chances of coming in contact with the virus. One in four people are avoiding air travel, and 12 percent have stopped hugging and kissing close friends and relatives.

Though the survey revealed several notable trends, Blendon cautioned against drawing individual conclusions from the results.

"Our expertise is to report what people are doing, not telling people what to do," he said, adding that people should frequent the CDC website for the most up-to-date information on the flu.

According to David S. Rosenthal '59, director of Harvard University Health Services, the survey shows the power that mass media has to either spread panic or reduce concern.

"It's interesting to see how quickly people went from fear to a sort of relaxed mode," said Rosenthal. He added that people "should not let their guard down" even though the flu outbreak has been less severe than anticipated.

] "The flu] could come back more virulent in the fall," Rosenthal said. "We're not raising concerns yet, but we are being very observant".

—Staff Writer Helen X. Yang can be reached at hxyang@fas.harvard.edu.