

September/October 1998

The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Health News Index is designed to help the news media and people in the health field gain a better understanding of which health stories in the news Americans are following and what they understand about those health issues. Every two months, Kaiser/Harvard issues a new index report. This fourteenth report is based on a survey of 1,202 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between September 1 and October 5, 1998. For comparison purposes, respondents were also asked about other leading issues in the news during the same period.

HEALTH NEWS STORIES FOLLOWED BY THE PUBLIC

The health news stories followed most closely by Americans in September were the announcement of two new drugs developed to treat breast cancer (48 percent) and reports about HMOs withdrawing their participation from the Medicare program (47 percent).

By comparison, 76 percent closely followed reports about Hurricane Georges and 69 percent closely

followed the release of the Starr Report concerning President Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Two-thirds of Americans closely followed Mark McGwire's and Sammy Sosa's pursuit of baseball's home run record.

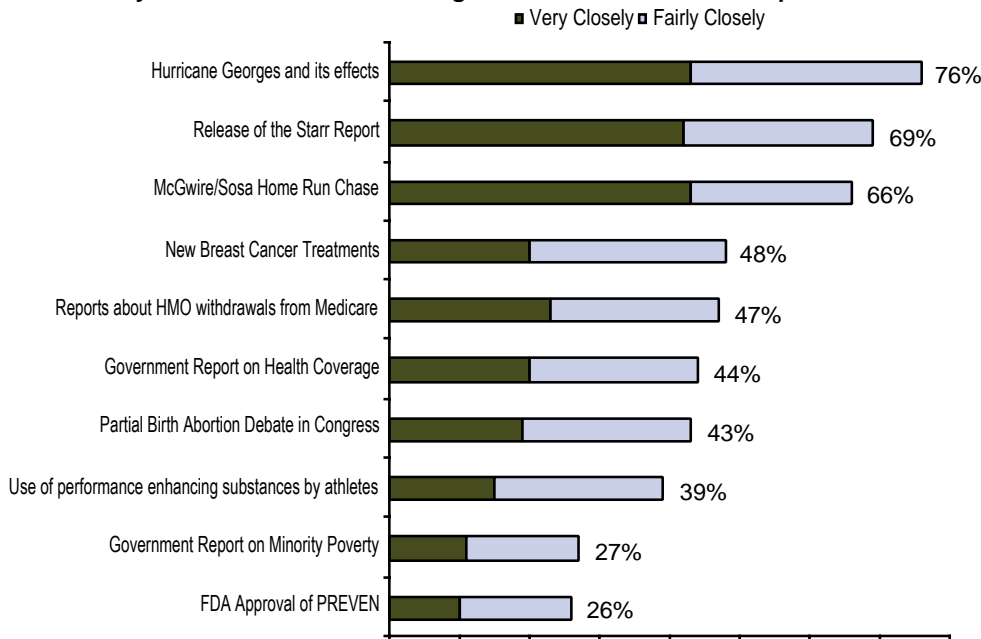
Among other health issues in the news, 44 percent closely followed the release of a Census Bureau report that said that the percentage of uninsured Americans is rising. The debate over partial-birth abortion in the Congress was closely followed by 43 percent of the public.

Nearly 2 in 5 Americans (39 percent) paid close attention to issues surrounding the use of performance enhancement substances by professional athletes, such as the use of androstenedione (a natural steroid that boosts testosterone levels) by Mark McGwire.

Fewer Americans closely followed news about a government report that announced a decline in the poverty rate among African-American and Latino populations (27 percent) or the Food and Drug Administration's approval of Preven -- a new packaging of birth control pills to be used as an emergency contraceptive (26 percent).

THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from September 1 to October 5, 1998



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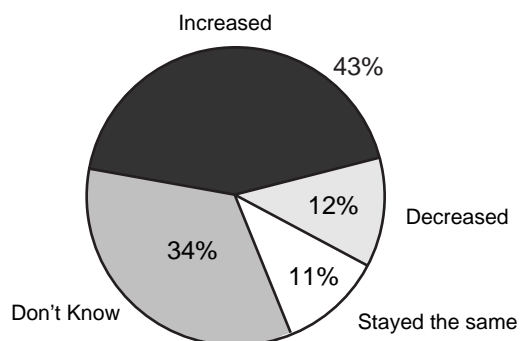
A Product of the Kaiser/Harvard Program on the Public and Health Policy

WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

The Uninsured:

News stories in September included reports about a Census Bureau study that showed an increase in the percentage of Americans who do not have health insurance coverage. Nearly half of Americans (43 percent) knew that the percentage of uninsured had increased. About one in ten Americans (12 percent) incorrectly believed that the percentage decreased and a similar percentage (11 percent) thought the percentage of uninsured was about the same. About a third (34 percent) said they did not know.

Has the percentage of uninsured increased, decreased or stayed the same?

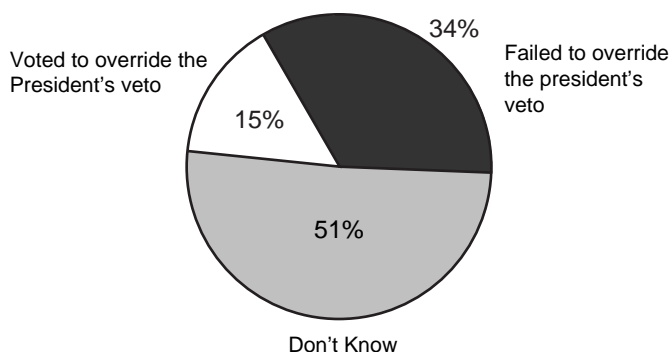


Correct answer: According to the Census Bureau report, the percentage has increased.

Late Term Abortions:

While 43 percent reported following closely the debate in the Senate on late term abortions, about a third (34 percent) of the public knew that the Senate did not override President Clinton's veto of the bill that would have banned the procedure. Fifteen percent mistakenly thought that the veto had been successfully overridden. A majority of Americans (51 percent) said that they did not know.

What action did the U.S. Senate take on the President's veto of the ban on late term abortions?

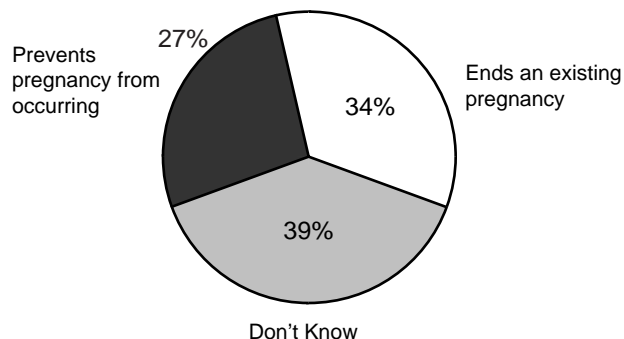


Correct answer: The Senate failed to override the President's veto.

PREVEN® and Emergency Contraception:

About one quarter of the public followed stories about PREVEN®. When asked how it works, just 27 percent correctly said it prevents a pregnancy from occurring. Thirty-four percent mistakenly believed it ends an existing pregnancy, while 39 percent said they did not know.

What does PREVEN® do?



Correct Answer: It prevents a pregnancy from occurring.

The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,202 Americans conducted October 10-18, 1998, to measure Americans' interest in and knowledge of health stories covered in the news media during the previous month. The survey was designed and analyzed jointly by the staff of the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University in consultation with the Pew Center for The People and The Press. The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of error is $\pm 3\%$. For additional copies of this report, please call (800) 656-4533.0