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May/June 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 twelfth report is based on a survey of 1,202 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between May 1 and June 7, 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 news story followed most closely by Americans in May was the shooting attack by a student at a high school in Oregon. Nearly nine in ten (85%) of those surveyed said they followed this story very or fairly closely. By comparison, the most closely followed health-related story in May was the legislation debated in Congress surrounding the tobacco legislation (74%).

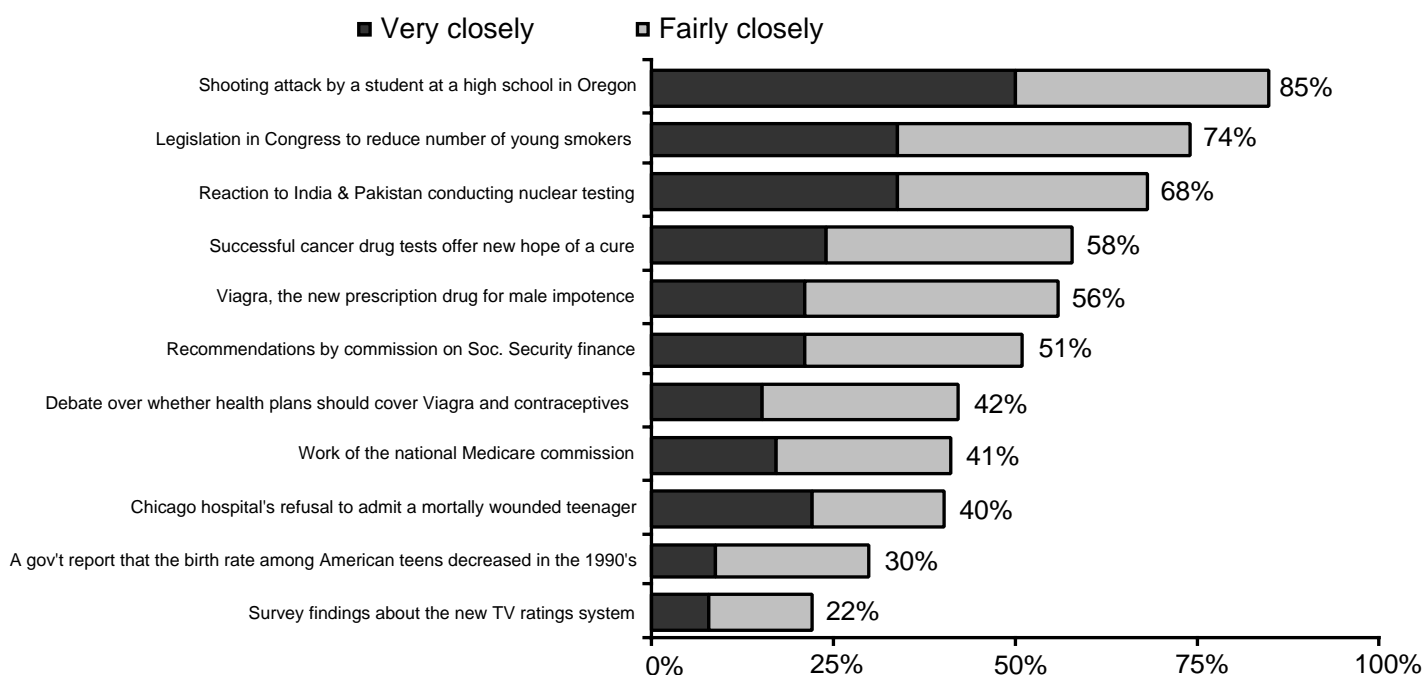
Approximately six in ten Americans (58%) said they followed the reports of successful drug tests conducted on mice that offered new hope of a cancer cure for humans. A similar number (56%) reported following news stories about the male impotence drug Viagra. But slightly fewer people (42%) followed related stories about whether health plans should cover Viagra and birth control pills.

About half (51%) of those surveyed said they followed stories on the recommendations put forth by a commission made up of members of Congress and the private sector about how to keep the Social Security system financially sound. Stories about the work of a government-appointed commission on Medicare, which has been meeting throughout the spring, were followed by about two in five (41%). About two in five Americans (40%) also followed stories about the refusal of a Chicago hospital to admit a mortally wounded teenager.

News stories about a government report on the declining teen birth rate in the United States were followed very or fairly closely by about one-third (30%) of respondents. Stories reporting on a Kaiser survey about how families are using the new TV ratings system was followed by about one in five (22%) Americans.

THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from May 1 to June 7, 1998



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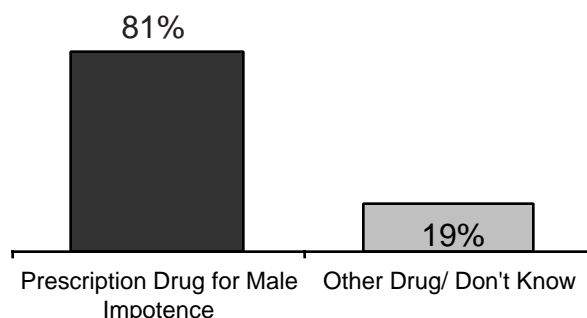
Harvard School of Public Health: 677 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115 617 432-4502 Fax 617 432-0092

WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

Viagra:

News stories in May included reports about Viagra, which four in five (81%) Americans correctly identified as a new prescription drug for male impotence.

A new drug called "Viagra" has been in the news recently. As far as you know is Viagra...

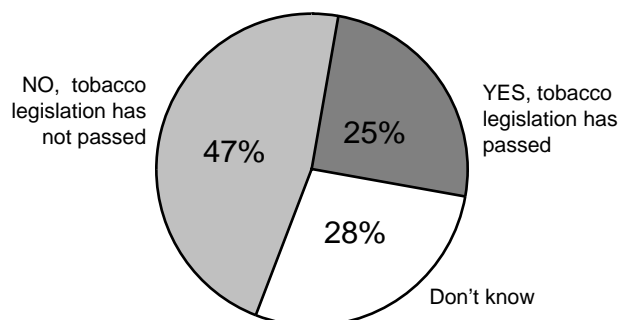


Correct answer: Prescription drug for male impotence

Tobacco Legislation:

About half (47%) of those surveyed knew that Congress had not, at the time of the survey, passed any tobacco legislation. One in four (25%) mistakenly thought Congress had passed tobacco legislation and 28% said they didn't know.

Has any of the proposed Tobacco Legislation to raise cigarette taxes and limit tobacco advertising been passed by Congress?

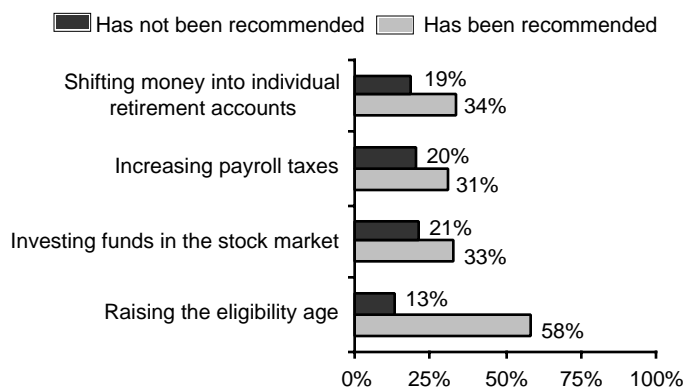


Correct answer: Congress has not passed any tobacco legislation.

Social Security:

In May, a commission made up of members of Congress and the private sector released recommendations to help keep the Social Security system solvent. The two changes it advised were raising the retirement age at which people become eligible for Social Security, and investing some Social Security funds in the stock market. Nearly three in five (58%) Americans knew that the commission had recommended raising the eligibility age. Far fewer (33%) correctly said the commission had advised investing Social Security funds in the stock market. Similar numbers of people *incorrectly* thought the commission suggested increasing the Social security payroll tax (31%) and shifting money from the Social Security trust fund into individual retirement accounts (34%).

Which of the following was recommended by a public/private commission on Social Security?



Correct answers: Investing funds in the stock market; Raising the eligibility age

The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,202 Americans conducted June 12-18, 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.