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he Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health's *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 issues. Every two months since 1996, Kaiser/Harvard has issued a new index report. This report is based on a survey of 580 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between April 24 and May 24, 2000. 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

Slightly over half of Americans (54%) closely followed May news reports of the Mother's Day Million Mom March in support of gun control laws, and 45% also closely followed news of the discussions in Congress about adding prescription drug benefits to the

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Medicare program. By comparison, 64% of Americans closely followed news of the wildfires in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

About half (49%) closely followed New York City Mayor Giuliani's announcement that he has prostate cancer and his withdrawal from the U.S. Senate race. A similar percentage of Americans (44%) followed closely Presidential candidate George W. Bush's proposals for making the Social Security program financially sound. News coverage of the debate in Congress and the subsequent passing of the China trade bill was followed closely by four in ten (40%) Americans.

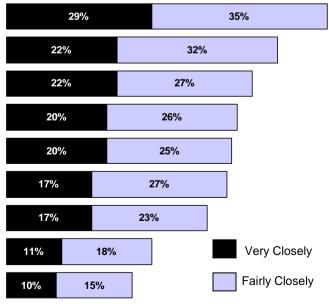
Among other health issues in the news, about half of Americans (46%) closely followed news of changing rates of cancer in the U.S. News coverage of the artificial sweetener saccharin as a possible carcinogen was closely followed by 29% of the public. One-fourth of the public (25%) closely followed news of a government agency report about the toxic chemical Dioxin's increased risks to human health.

## KAISER/HARVARD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH HEALTH NEWS INDEX

#### How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from April 24 to May 24, 2000

Wildfires that burned through Los Alamos, New Mexico Mother's Day Million Mom March in support of gun control laws NYC Mayor Giuliani's announcement of prostate cancer and withdrawal from the U.S. Senate race Falling cancer rates and death rates related to cancer Debate in Congress about Medicare coverage of prescription drug costs George W. Bush's proposals to make the Social Security program financially sound Debate over the China trade bill passed by Congress News concerning saccharin's removal from the list of known carcinogens News about a government report on the increased health

risks of Dioxin



## WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

#### Medicare and Prescription Drug Benefits

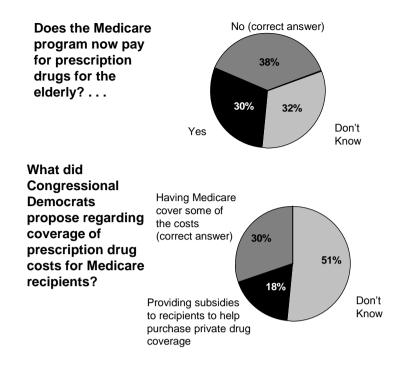
Forty-five percent of Americans closely followed news of discussions in Congress about the Medicare program covering prescription drug costs. However, many Americans did not know that the Medicare program does not already pay for prescription drugs. About one in four (38%) knew that the program does not currently cover prescription drug costs. Three in ten incorrectly thought that it did, while 32% said they did not know. When asked specifically about proposals made by Congressional Democrats in the past month, 30% of Americans knew that the Democrats had proposed making the Medicare program cover some of the costs for prescription drugs. Just over half (51%) of Americans said they did not know. About one in five persons (18%) incorrectly said Democrats proposed providing subsidies to help Medicare recipients buy private insurance to help cover the costs of prescription drugs. (The Republican drug coverage plan was made public in June)

### Bush's Social Security Plan

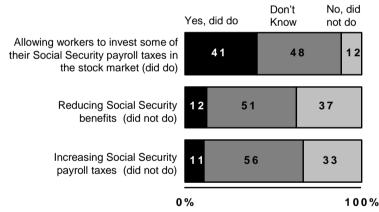
About four in ten Americans (44%) closely followed news reports of Presidential candidate George W. Bush's proposals to make the Social Security program financially sound. A similar percentage of Americans (41%) correctly said that Bush proposed allowing workers to invest some of their Social Security payroll taxes in the stock market. About one third of Americans correctly said that Bush had not proposed reducing benefits (37%) or increasing Social Security payroll taxes (33%).

#### Cancer Rates in the U.S.

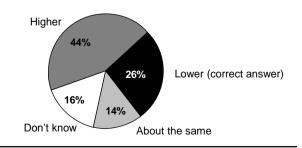
Forty-six percent of Americans also closely followed news stories of changes in the U.S. cancer rate over the past 10 years. About one in four (26%) correctly said that cancer rates were lower. Slightly more than four in ten (44%) incorrectly said that the cancer rate was higher, while 14% said rates were about the same and 16% said they did not know.



# Did George W. Bush propose to make Social Security financially sound by ...



#### Over the past 10 years, are cancer rates in the U.S. ...?



The *Health News Index* is based on a national random sample survey of 580 Americans conducted May 26- June 4, 2000 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 Dr. Mollyann Brodie and staff of the Kaiser Family Foundation and Dr. Robert J. Blendon and staff at the Harvard University School of Public Health, and in consultation with the Pew Center for The People and The Press. The fieldwork was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of error is +/- 4%. For additional copies of this report (#3030), please call the Kaiser Family Foundation's Publications Request Line at 1-800-656-4533, or visit our website at www.kff.org.