

Lauren Asher (650) 854-9400

**T**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 national survey of 999 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between October 26 and November 26, 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**

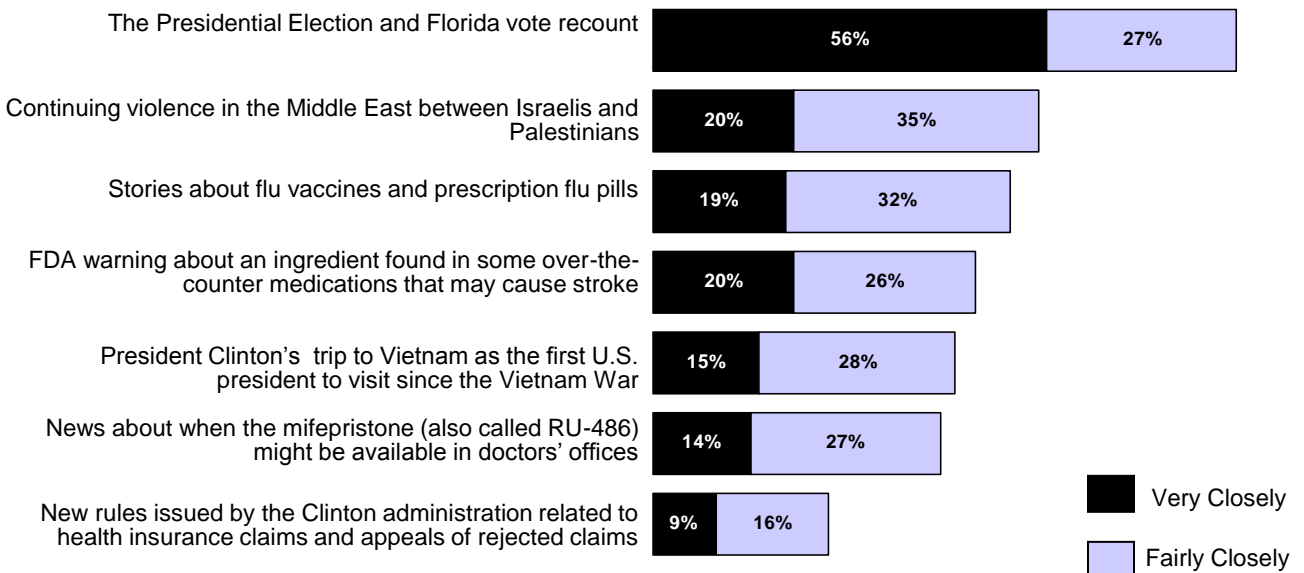
About half of Americans (51%) said they closely followed news stories this month about the shortage of flu vaccines and prescription flu pills. By comparison, 83% of Americans said they closely followed stories

about the Presidential Election and the Florida vote recount. About half (55%) said they closely followed news of the continuing violence in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians, and 43% said they followed news coverage of President Clinton's trip to Vietnam.

Among other health issues in the news, 46% said they closely followed stories about the FDA warning about phenylpropanolamine, or PPA, an ingredient found in some over-the-counter cough, cold, and diet medications that may cause stroke. Slightly fewer (41%) followed news coverage about when the abortion pill mifepristone, also called RU-486, might be available in doctors' offices. A quarter of Americans said they followed news stories about the new rules issued by the Clinton Administration related to the processing of health insurance claims and appeals of rejected claims.

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

**How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from October 26 to November 26, 2000**



# HEALTH NEWS INDEX YEAR 2000 SUMMARY

## Health News Stories

Last winter's flu outbreak topped the list of health news stories followed closely by the public during the year 2000, with 67% saying they followed the news coverage "very" or "fairly" closely. Fifty-one percent also followed recent news about the shortage of flu vaccines and prescription flu pills. Another issue that dominates the list is the Medicare and prescription drug debate, including news about George W. Bush's plan to help the elderly pay for prescription drugs (54%) and the debate in Congress in August about how to provide prescription drug coverage to seniors (51%). Stories related to gun control efforts were also closely followed, with 60% saying they closely followed news of President Clinton's gun control initiative and 54% saying they closely followed news of the Mother's Day Million Mom March. Stories related to tobacco were also popular this year, with 52% saying they closely followed stories of the jury's decision in the case where sick Florida smokers were suing tobacco companies, and 48% saying they closely followed news of the Supreme Court's ruling on the authority of the FDA to regulate tobacco.

### Most Closely Followed Health Stories of 2000 (% followed "very" or "fairly" closely)

Story	%
1. Flu outbreak	67
2. President Clinton's gun control initiative	60
3. Bush's plan to help elderly pay for prescription drugs	54
4. Mother's Day Million Mom March for gun control laws	54
5. Florida jury's decision in tobacco company case	52
6. Debate in Congress about providing prescription drug benefits to seniors	51
6. Stories about flu vaccines and prescription flu pills	51
8. Presidential candidate Al Gore's Medicare proposals	49
9. Congressional action to remove limits on Social Security benefits	48
10. Supreme Court's ruling on authority of FDA to regulate tobacco	48

## Women, Men, and Health News

Across all news stories, women, on average, were slightly more likely than men to say they followed a health news story (43% v. 37%). However, some topics seemed to interest women significantly more than men. In particular, stories this year related to cancer were followed more closely by women. This included not only stories about breast cancer (20 percentage point gap), but also stories about the rates of cancer in the US (21 point gap) and news about the artificial sweetener saccharin and cancer (12 point gap). Women also were more likely to follow news stories about the Supreme Court's ruling that States cannot ban a procedure critics call "partial-birth abortion," though they were not any more likely than men to follow the other stories related to abortion covered in the news this year.

### Men and Women

(% followed "very" or "fairly" closely)

Story	Men %	Women %
Cancer rates and death rates related to cancer in the US	36	57
Study revealing link between hormone replacement therapy and breast cancer	25	45
Stories about flu vaccines and prescription flu pills	40	60
FDA warning about an ingredient found in some over-the-counter medications	36	53
Supreme Court ruling that states cannot ban "partial-birth abortion"	37	49

## Older Americans Tuning In

On average, across all news stories, Americans over age 65 are more likely than those under 65 to follow health news stories closely (47% v. 39%). Older Americans were particularly attentive to news stories related to the Medicare and prescription drug debate. In June, about half of those 65 and older closely followed the debate in Congress about providing prescription drug benefits to seniors. In August that number jumped even higher to 69%, and a similar number were still following the issue in October as 67% said they closely followed news about George W. Bush's plan to help the elderly pay for prescription drugs, and 59% said they closely followed Al Gore's Medicare proposal.

In comparison, those under the age of 30 are the least attentive to health news stories, with only 32% tuning in on average. News about scientists completing a map of the human genetic code was the only health story where more young people (42%) than seniors (30%) tuned in.

### Medicare and Prescription Drugs

Percent of people who have been "very" or "fairly" closely following news stories about Medicare and Prescription Drug Coverage in 2000

