

September/October 1997



The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Health News Index is designed to help the news media and people in the health care 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 eighth report is based on a survey of 1,007 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between September 1 and 30, 1997. 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-related story followed most closely by Americans during September was the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) request that drug manufacturers remove the diet drugs commonly known as phen-fen from the market. That story was followed very or fairly closely by three in five

(60%) of all Americans. By comparison, stories about the late Princess Diana were followed by 71% of Americans.

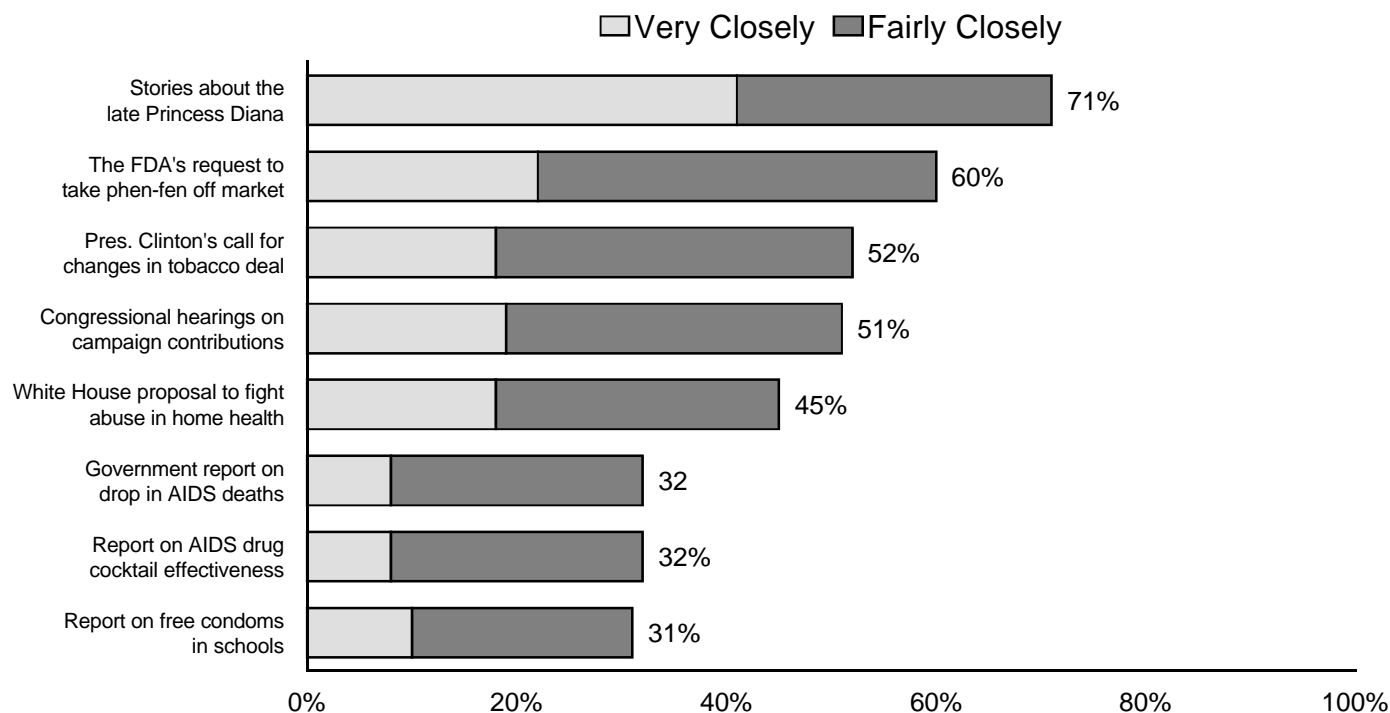
About half of those surveyed (52%) said they followed the news stories about President Clinton's call for changes in the deal agreed to last June to settle lawsuits between tobacco companies and 39 states. Slightly less than half (45%) followed the White House's proposals to fight fraud and abuse in the Medicare home health program.

Two AIDS stories that appeared in the news in September were each followed by about one-third of Americans. Reports on the effectiveness of the new combination drug cocktail for people with AIDS was followed closely by 32% of respondents. The same proportion (32%) followed stories about a government report on a drop in the number of AIDS deaths in this country.

News reports of a study that found the distribution of free condoms in schools does not increase sexual activity among teens were followed very or fairly closely by less than one third (31%) of Americans.

THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from September 1 - 30, 1997

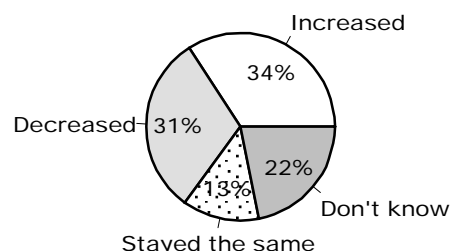


WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

AIDS: Last month the government issued a report showing that the number of AIDS-related deaths in the United States had declined in the last year. About one-third (32%) of Americans said they followed that story in the news. Almost the same proportion (31%) knew that the number of deaths had declined. Another third (34%) incorrectly thought that the number of deaths had increased, while 13% thought the death rate had stayed about the same.

Another AIDS-related story, about the effectiveness of the new drug cocktail, appeared in the news in September. Again, about one third (30%) correctly said that after six months this cocktail treatment was effective for only about half the patients. One quarter (24%) thought the treatment had been more successful than previously thought and two in five (40%) said they didn't know about the efficacy of the cocktail.

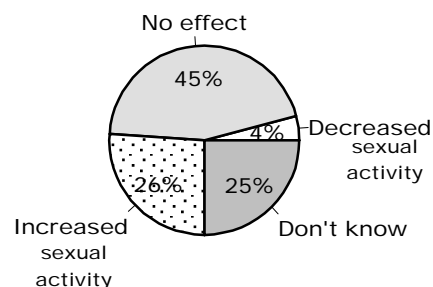
In recent years, have the number of AIDS-related deaths...



Correct answer:
Decreased

Condoms in Schools: News stories in September reported on a study about the relationship between distributing free condoms in schools and teen sexual activity. Nearly half of all Americans (45%) knew that the study found no increase in sexual activity among teens when free condoms were made available. Most of the rest incorrectly thought that free condoms had increased sexual activity among teens (26%) or didn't know (25%).

According to a new study, what effect do free condoms in schools have on teens' sexual activity?

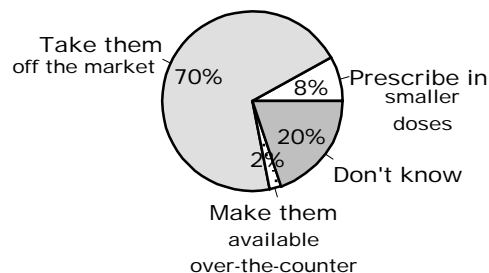


Correct answer:
No effect

Tobacco Companies: In September, President Clinton suggested changes to the deal reached between tobacco companies and 39 states. The President recommended a \$1.50 per pack increase in the price of cigarettes if teen smoking rates do not decline. Just less than half of Americans (44%) knew what the president had proposed. About one third either thought he had suggested increasing the amount tobacco companies had to pay to states by \$200 billion (17%) or had advocated raising the legal age for buying cigarettes to 21 (16%). Nearly one-quarter (23%) said they didn't know.

The FDA recommended what action regarding the diet drugs phen-fen?

FDA and Phen-Fen: In September the FDA asked drug companies to take the diet drugs commonly known as phen-fen off the market. Seven in ten (70%) of those surveyed knew that the FDA had asked manufacturers to take the drugs off the market. Three in four Americans (75%) correctly identified the reason the FDA asked the drug companies to remove the drugs--because they caused heart valve problems.



Correct answer:
Take them off the market

