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Half of Americans Say Threats From Infectious Diseases Are Growing

The rise of the Zika virus has caught public attention and people are particularly worried about its threat to pregnant women

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Half of Americans Say Threats From Infectious Diseases Are Growing

The rise of the Zika virus has caught public attention and people are particularly worried about its threat to pregnant women

The Zika virus has become a concern to many Americans, and its emergence fits into a broader pattern of public concern that the number of infectious disease threats to people's health has grown in the past generation. Some 51% of adults say there are more infectious disease threats today than there were 20 years ago.

A new survey from Pew Research Center shows the public is paying attention to these threats. Fully 82% of Americans say they pay “a lot” or “some” attention to news of any kind about threats from infectious diseases. These concerns arise in a new century that has seen [a number of menacing disease outbreaks](#), including Ebola and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) lung disease in 2014, Swine Flu in 2009, SARS lung disease in 2003 and the West Nile virus in 2002. [Public health officials](#) around the globe have added the [possibility of pandemics](#) to their list of issues that should [prompt international efforts](#).

Americans' latest focus is on the Zika virus, a mosquito-borne illness that is tied to severe birth defects in South America and the Caribbean. The new survey shows that:

- 58% of Americans believe the Zika virus is a major threat to the health of [women who are pregnant](#) or trying to get pregnant, while 32% say it poses a minor threat to these women. Just 7% believe it is not a threat to these women.
- 31% believe the Zika virus is a major threat to the [U.S. population as a whole](#). Another 58% say it is a minor threat, and 8% say the virus poses no threat.

Americans worry the number of infectious disease threats to health is growing

% of U.S. adults saying compared with 20 years ago, there are ... to people's health from infectious diseases



Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.

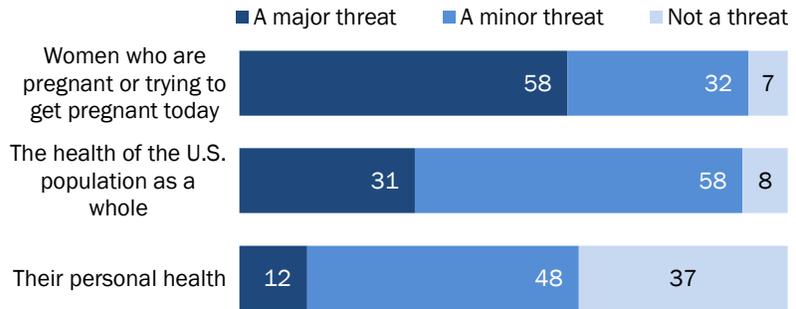
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- 12% say it is a major threat to their personal health and another 48% think it is a minor threat. Some 37% believe it is not a threat to their health.

Most in U.S. public think the Zika virus poses some level of threat

% of U.S. adults saying the Zika virus is ... to each of the following



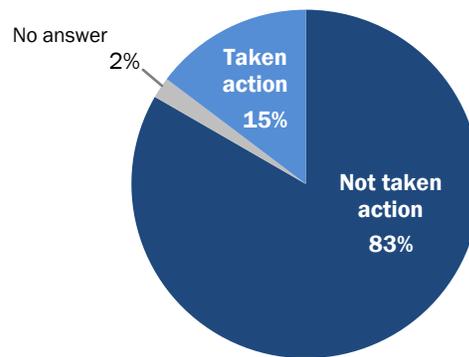
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In addition, about one-in-seven adults (15%) say they have taken steps to reduce their risk of getting the virus.

15% of Americans have taken steps to reduce the risk posed by Zika virus

% of U.S. adults saying they have taken any action to reduce their risk of getting the Zika virus



Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.
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There are notable demographic differences tied to people's views about the threat posed by the Zika virus. Generally those who are most concerned include older Americans (especially older women) and those who report "fair" or "poor" health status. Blacks and those who live in the South and Northeast also tend to be more concerned about Zika. But Republicans and independents who lean Republican are about equally likely as Democrats and leaning Democrats to say Zika is a threat to public health. [Congress adjourned at the end of June](#) for a recess without acting on proposals to increase funding for an emergency program to try to halt the spread of the virus.

Fully 85% of Americans have heard or read about the virus – 38% say they have heard or read "a lot" and 48% say they have read "a little" about it. Those who have paid the most attention are also more likely than others to believe the virus is a threat to the population as a whole, to pregnant women and to themselves.

Many Americans are paying attention to Zika virus

% of U.S. adults saying they have heard or read ... about the Zika virus



Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.
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How the public's focus on Zika compares with concern about other diseases in the past

The level of attention and concern about Zika could evolve if new outbreaks occur and news coverage of the virus potentially increases heading into the Summer Olympics Games in Brazil. By the height of the most-recent major Ebola outbreak in Africa in the fall of 2014, Pew Research Center surveys found that [98% of Americans had heard at least a little about the Ebola problem](#). Some 79% had heard a lot about the Ebola situation at that time, compared with the 38% who say they have heard a lot about the Zika problem now.

While the questions asked about Ebola differed from the current survey, as a point of broad comparison, 41% of Americans said at the height of the Ebola outbreak they were at least somewhat "worried that they themselves or a family member would be exposed to the virus." In the Zika survey, only 12% say Zika is a major threat to them, personally; another 48% consider it a minor threat. The Zika question did not ask about other family members.

The Zika situation seems to be garnering attention at a similar level to the swine flu outbreak that arose in May 2009 and the worries about the SARS virus in 2003. In 2009, the Center found that

[42% of adults were paying “a lot” of attention to the issue of whether there would be enough vaccines in the upcoming swine flu season.](#) In 2003, Pew Research Center found that [39% were paying close attention to the SARS story.](#) In 2002, a Center survey showed that 34% were paying close attention to stories about the West Nile virus. See this [2014 Pew Research Center post](#) for a rundown of findings in previous Center surveys.

Those who are most concerned about the Zika virus include older adults, especially older women, and those in poorer health

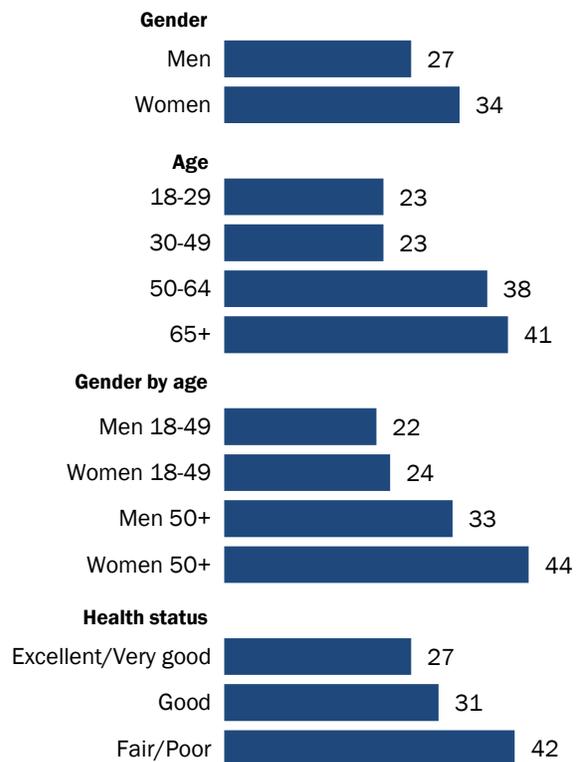
Generally, those who are most concerned about Zika include older adults, especially older women, and those who report “fair” or “poor” health status. For instance, 44% of women ages 50 and older think Zika is a major threat to the U.S.

population as a whole, compared with 33% of older men. By contrast, 23% of adults under age 50 consider Zika a major threat to the population. Additionally, 42% of those who report being in “fair” or “poor” health feel it is a major threat vs. 27% of those who say they are in “excellent” or “very good” health.

These groups have traditionally been more focused than others on [health and medical information](#).

Different groups hold different views about the level of threat from Zika

% of U.S. adults saying the Zika virus is a major threat for the health of the U.S. population as a whole



Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.
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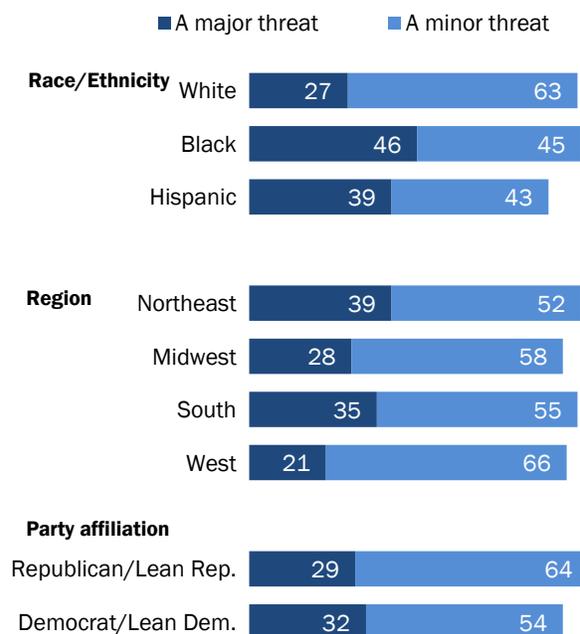
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Additionally, blacks as compared with whites, and those living in the South and Northeast are more inclined to see Zika as a threat to public health. Some 46% of blacks, compared with 27% of whites, believe Zika is a major threat to the population. (The 39% of Hispanics saying Zika is a major threat is not statistically different than the share saying the same among either blacks or whites.) These findings are in line with previous surveys showing a higher level of concern among blacks about some health issues, particularly about [experimental-health matters](#).

There were also regional differences about the level of threat Zika poses. Some 39% of Northeasterners and 35% of Southerners believe the Zika virus is a major threat to the American population, compared with 21% of Westerners and 28% of Midwesterners who say they think the threat level is high.

Whites are less likely to think Zika virus is a major threat; no major partisan differences in people's views

% of U.S. adults saying the Zika virus is a major threat for the health of the U.S. population as a whole



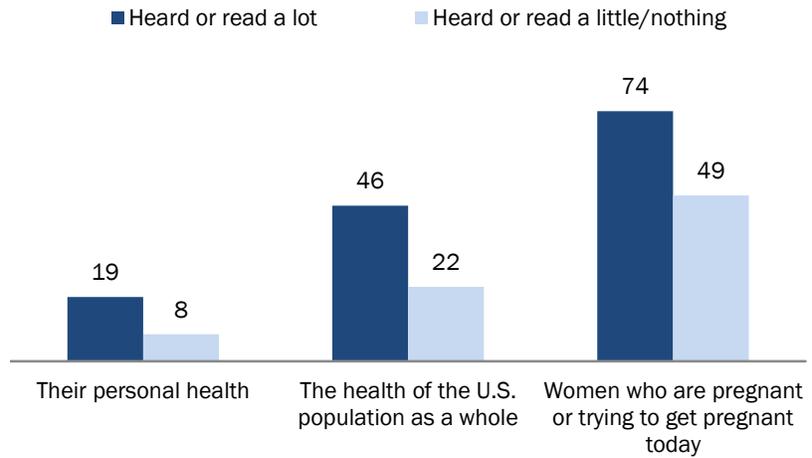
Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.
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Those paying the most attention to news about the Zika virus are more likely than others to view it as a threat. For instance, 74% of those who have heard a lot about Zika consider it a major threat to pregnant women or those trying to get pregnant, compared with 49% of those who have heard only a little or nothing about Zika who feel that way.

Those tuned in to Zika news also tend to see it as a major threat

% of U.S. adults who have ... about the Zika virus saying it is a major threat to each of the following



Note: Based on those saying they have heard or read a lot or a little/nothing at all about the Zika virus.

Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.

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Acknowledgments

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Methodology

This report is drawn from a survey conducted as part of the American Trends Panel (ATP), a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults living in households, created by Pew Research Center. Respondents who self-identify as internet users and who provided an email address participate in the panel via monthly self-administered web surveys, and those who do not use the internet or decline to provide an email address participate via the mail. The panel is being managed by Abt SRBI.

Data in this report are from the May wave of the panel, conducted May 10-June 6, 2016, among 1,549 respondents (1,376 by web and 173 by mail). The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 1,549 respondents is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points.

Members of the American Trends Panel were recruited from two large, national landline and cellphone random-digit-dial (RDD) surveys conducted in English and Spanish. At the end of each survey, respondents were invited to join the panel. The first group of panelists was recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, conducted Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014. Of the 10,013 adults interviewed, 9,809 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 5,338 agreed to participate.¹ The second group of panelists was recruited from the 2015 Survey on Government, conducted Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015. Of the 6,004 adults interviewed, all were invited to join the panel, and 2,976 agreed to participate.²

Participating panelists provided either a mailing address or an email address to which a welcome packet, a monetary incentive and future survey invitations could be sent. Panelists also receive a small monetary incentive after participating in each wave of the survey.

The ATP data were weighted in a multi-step process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel and remain an active panelist varied across different groups in the sample. The final step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and region to parameters from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 American Community Survey. Population density is weighted to match the 2010 U.S. Decennial

1 When data collection for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey began, non-internet users were subsampled at a rate of 25%, but a decision was made shortly thereafter to invite all non-internet users to join. In total, 83% of non-internet users were invited to join the panel.

2 Respondents to the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey who indicated that they are internet users but refused to provide an email address were initially permitted to participate in the American Trends Panel by mail, but were no longer permitted to join the panel after Feb. 6, 2014. Internet users from the 2015 Survey on Government who refused to provide an email address were not permitted to join the panel.

Census. Telephone service is weighted to estimates of telephone coverage for 2016 that were projected from the July-December 2015 National Health Interview Survey. Volunteerism is weighted to match the 2013 Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement. It also adjusts for party affiliation using an average of the three most recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys. Internet access is adjusted using a measure from the 2015 Survey on Government. Frequency of internet use is weighted to an estimate of daily internet use projected to 2016 from the 2013 Current Population Survey Computer and Internet Use Supplement. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the American Trends Panel is predominantly native born and English speaking.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey: Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	1,549	4.0% percentage points
Men	762	5.7% percentage points
Women	787	5.6% percentage points
White	1,183	4.5% percentage points
Black	133	13.5% percentage points
Hispanic	132	13.6% percentage points
18-29	189	11.4% percentage points
30-49	411	7.7% percentage points
50-64	515	6.9% percentage points
65 and older	434	7.5% percentage points
Northeast	265	9.6% percentage points
Midwest	338	8.5% percentage points
South	577	6.5% percentage points
West	369	8.1% percentage points
Party affiliation		
Republican/lean Rep.	660	6.1% percentage points
Democrat/lean Dem.	843	5.4% percentage points
Rating of health status		
Extremely/very good	749	5.7% percentage points
Good	484	7.1% percentage points
Fair/poor	234	10.2% percentage points

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The web component of the May wave had a response rate of 81% (4,091 responses among 5,053 web-based individuals in the panel); the mail component had a response rate of 77% (472 responses among 617 non-web individuals in the panel). Taking account of the combined, weighted response rate for the recruitment surveys (10.0%) and attrition from panel members who were removed at their request or for inactivity, the cumulative response rate for the May ATP wave is 2.9%.³

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³ Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves are removed from the panel. These cases are counted in the denominator of cumulative response rates.

Survey questionnaire and topline

2016 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL

May 10 – June 6, 2016

TOTAL N=4,563

WEB RESPONDENTS N=4,091

MAIL RESPONDENTS N=472⁴

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE

ASK FORM 1 [N=1,549]:

BIO3 How much attention do you pay to news about health threats from infectious diseases, which are diseases spread from one person to another?

May 10-June 6

2016

34	A lot
48	Some
15	Not too much
2	None
1	No answer

ASK FORM 1 [N=1,549]:

BIO4 Compared with twenty years ago, do you think there are more, fewer, or about the same number of threats to people's health from infectious disease today?

May 10-June 6

2016

51	More threats today
20	Fewer threats today
28	About the same number of threats today
1	No answer

ASK FORM 1 [N=1,549]:

BIO5 How much, if anything, have you heard or read about the Zika virus?

May 10-June 6

2016

38	A lot
48	A little
14	Nothing at all
1	No answer

⁴ Question wording in this topline is that from the web version of the survey. Question wording and format was adapted for the paper questionnaire delivered by mail; this questionnaire is available on request. All questions asked in both modes unless noted.

ASK FORM 1 [N=1,549]:

BIO6 How much of a threat, if any, is the Zika virus for...

a. The health of the U.S. population as whole

May 10-June 6

2016

31	A major threat
58	A minor threat
8	Not a threat
3	No answer

b. Your personal health

May 10-June 6

2016

12	A major threat
48	A minor threat
37	Not a threat
2	No answer

c. For women who are pregnant or trying to get pregnant today

May 10-June 6

2016

58	A major threat
32	A minor threat
7	Not a threat
3	No answer

ASK FORM 1 [N=1,549]:

BIO7 Have you, personally, taken any actions to reduce your risk of getting the Zika virus, or haven't you done this?

May 10-June 6

2016

15	Yes
83	No
2	No answer

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE

2016 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL**April 5 – May 2, 2016****TOTAL N=4,685****WEB RESPONDENTS N=4,207****MAIL RESPONDENTS N=478****ASK ALL:**

HLTHRATE

Would you say that in general your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Apr 5-May 2 <u>2016</u>		Jul 7-Aug 4 <u>2014</u> ⁵
11	Excellent	13
32	Very good	35
37	Good	32
14	Fair	15
4	Poor	5
1	No answer	*

⁵ In Wave 5 (Jul 7-Aug 4, 2014), interviews were conducted by phone and web.