

Attitudes and Beliefs About Immune Health:
*A National Opinion Survey Conducted for
The Center for Immune Research*

An Executive Summary

The human body is constantly under attack from millions of microorganisms, such as bacteria, viruses, and allergens. The immune system is the human body's defense against these "foreign invaders" and operates a silent army that wards off infection and keeps us healthy. Consisting of a complex network of cells, tissues, and organs, the immune system involves a sensitive process of checks and balances within the body that produce an immune response that is prompt, accurate, effective and self-limiting.

But to what extent is information about immune health being incorporated into the public's decisions about self-care. To answer this question, the Center for Immune Research commissioned a new opinion poll of 1,051 adult Americans aged 18 and over. Conducted in December 2005 by Opinion Research Corporation, the survey finds that although there is heightened public concern about increased susceptibility to viruses in light of fears of new forms of the flu, a significant knowledge gap about immune health is keeping the public from taking steps that will enhance and strengthen their natural defenses.

What follows is a summary of these research findings:

1. **Americans are increasingly concerned about possible attacks on their immune systems.**
 - In light of news reports about a predicted worldwide flu outbreak, threats to the immune system are very much on the minds of most Americans. Only 2 percent of Americans say they have not heard about possible attacks to the immune system.
 - As a result, more than half of all adults -- 54 percent or as estimated 100 million people -- say they are extremely or somewhat worried about invading viruses and the ability of their immune systems to respond. At the same time, 28 percent say they

are not very worried but are still paying attention.

- This leaves only 16 percent of the public who say they are not worried about their immune health.
- Of added significance, more than one third of adults (35 percent) -- or 73 million Americans -- say they are more concerned about possible attacks on our immune system than in previous years.
- Among the remaining two-thirds of the public, 59 percent report the same level of concern as previously and only 6 percent say they are less concerned than in previous years.

2. However, Americans lack information about the factors under their control that affect the functioning of their immune systems.

- When it comes to the steps the public can take to keep their immune systems healthy, Americans have a limited understanding of the factors under their control. On the positive side, two in three adults (63 percent) recognize the role a healthy diet plays in optimal immune health and four in ten (40 percent) make the link to getting enough exercise.
- However, only one-fourth of those polled know about the link between adequate sleep and a healthy immune system, although research has shown that sleep deprivation weakens the immune system and increases susceptibility to colds and flu.
- Of special concern is that almost one in ten Americans (9 percent) -- or more than 20 million consumers -- cannot name any factors that strengthen the immune system.
- Regarding those factors that weaken the immune system, the public has no understanding of the role that aging plays in limiting the body's ability to fight infection.
- Moreover, only a third of Americans (35 percent) identified poor diet as a contributing factor and even less made the link to lack of

adequate sleep (26 percent), psychological stress (19 percent), and lack of exercise (19 percent).

3. Americans are not aware of interferon and its critical role in promoting immune health.

- Because the natural protein interferon boosts the immune system and has a special role to play in triggering the body's immune response, scientists consider this substance especially important to enhance and strengthen the body's natural defense systems. However, only a third (34 percent) of the public knows anything about the role of interferon in promoting immune health.
- The remaining 66 percent of Americans say they have not heard of interferon.
- These findings suggest that public education about the role of interferon is especially important now that there are new options for naturally increasing the production of interferon in the body.

4. Many consumers want to know more about natural ways to strengthen their immune systems.

- When asked if they would be interested in learning about how to naturally strengthen their immune systems, fully a third of those surveyed (36 percent) said yes. This finding suggests that public education can raise awareness of the steps consumers can take to enhance their immune health.

The new survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,051 adult Americans (515 men, 536 women) using a national probability sample of individuals 18 years of age and older, living in private households in the continental United States. Interviewing was completed during the period December 1-4, 2005. To ensure a reliable and accurate representation of the total national adult population, complete interviews were weighted to known proportions for age, gender, geographic region, and race. The margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 3.1 percent.

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