

Humphrey Taylor
Chairman of *The Harris Poll*®

Flu Shots Appear to Have Provided Limited Protection Against Flu Last Winter

People who had flu shots last winter were less likely to get the flu than those who did not, but not much less likely. Twenty-one percent of adults who say they did not get flu shots believed they got the flu compared to 14% of adults who say they had flu shots.

These results should be treated with great caution. People may or may not remember accurately whether they did receive shots, and they may or may not be correct in believing they had the flu, as opposed to a heavy cough or cold. Without laboratory testing it is very difficult to distinguish which patients have the flu and which have other respiratory illnesses. However, there is other evidence in the survey which lends credibility to the data. For example:

- Of those who believed they had the flu, identical proportions (79%) of those who had and had not received flu shots spent at least one day in bed.
- Of those who believed they had the flu, more who had received the flu shots (80%) than had not (73%) felt “certain” that they had the flu.
- Among those who believed they had the flu, a higher proportion of those who had received the flu vaccine (51%) than had not (32%) had their flu diagnosed by a doctor. This superficially surprising difference can probably be explained by the likelihood that the kinds of people who get flu shots are also more likely to visit a doctor if they are sick.

These are the results of a nationwide survey of 3,698 adults who were surveyed online by Harris Interactive between March 18 and 29, 2004.

This is the second report of research by Harris Interactive to raise questions about the efficacy of flu vaccines. In a survey carried out in January 2004 reported in *Harris Interactive Health Care News* (Volume 4, Issue 1, January 15, 2004), we reported that there was no statistical difference in the reported prevalence of flu over the winter of 2002-2003 between those who had and those who had not received flu shots. We were so surprised by this finding that we decided to repeat the questions immediately after this winter’s flu season when people would be more likely to remember accurately whether they had the flu and also whether they had received flu shots.

In reviewing these new findings, there is one other reason not to overinterpret them, in addition to possibly faulty memory. It may be that those who decided to get flu shots would have been more likely to get the flu (if they had not received the vaccine) than those who did not get the shots. *If those who get the flu vaccine would have been more at risk than those who did not, then the shots may be more effective than they appear to be in the survey.*

TABLE 1

Whether Had A Flu Shot This Winter

“Thinking back to this winter just ending – did you have a flu vaccine shot before this winter?”

Base: All Adults

	Total
	%
Yes	35
No	64
Not sure	2

NOTE: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 2

Whether They Had Flu This Winter

“Thinking back to this winter just ending – did you get the flu this winter?”

Base: All Adults

	Total	Had Flu Vaccine	Did Not Have Flu Vaccine
	%	%	%
Yes	18	14	21
No	79	85	78
Not sure	2	1	1

NOTE: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 3

Whether Day Or More Spent In Bed With Flu

“Did you spend one or more days in bed with the flu?”

Base: Adults Who Got Flu This Past Winter

	Total	Had Flu Vaccine	Did Not Have Flu Vaccine
	%	%	%
Yes (spent day in bed)	79	79	79
No	21	21	21

TABLE 4

Whether Flu Was Diagnosed By A Doctor

“Did you visit a doctor who diagnosed the flu?”

Base: Adults Who Got Flu This Past Winter

	Total	Had Flu Vaccine	Did Not Have Flu Vaccine
	%	%	%
Yes (spent day in bed)	37	51	32
No	63	49	68

TABLE 5

Certain Had Flu Or Not?

“How certain are you that you got the flu, and that it was not just a cough or a cold?”

Base: Adults Who Got Flu This Past Winter

	Total	Had Flu Vaccine	Did Not Have Flu Vaccine
	%	%	%
Certain	75	80	73
Not certain	15	9	17
Not sure	10	11	10

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Methodology

This research was conducted online within the United States between March 18 and 29, 2004 among a nationwide cross section of 3,698 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, income and region were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

In theory, with probability samples of this size, one could say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus three percentage points of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, and weighting. It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors. This online sample was not a probability sample.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

About Harris Interactive

Harris Interactive (www.harrisinteractive.com) is a worldwide market research and consulting firm best known for *The Harris Poll*[®], and for pioneering the Internet method to conduct scientifically accurate market research. Headquartered in Rochester, New York, Harris Interactive combines proprietary methodologies and technology with expertise in predictive, custom and strategic research. The Company conducts international research from its U.S. offices and through wholly owned subsidiaries—London-based **HI Europe** (www.hieurope.com), Paris-based **Novatris** and Tokyo-based **Harris Interactive Japan**—as well as through the Harris Interactive Global Network of independent market- and opinion-research firms. EOE M/F/D/V

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For more information, please contact us at:
877.919.4765
or visit our website at
www.harrisinteractive.com

Media inquiries, contact:
Bonnie Hughes 585.214.7541
bhughes@harrisinteractive.com

Nancy Wong 585.214.7316
nwong@harrisinteractive.com

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