

# AMERICANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT CANCER

March 2016



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## INTRODUCTION

A new poll of adults in the United States by *Stat* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health finds substantial bipartisan support for the National Cancer Moonshot — a \$1 billion initiative announced by the White House in 2016 to “prevent, diagnose and treat cancer.”<sup>1</sup> Nearly half of Americans believe a 20 percent increase in federal funding for cancer research is about right, while more than a third would like to see an even greater rise in funding. This strong support is likely related to perceived gains in the efficacy of cancer treatment and the extent to which Americans perceive cancer as the nation’s most serious health threat. Results indicate that two-thirds of adults in the U.S. believe cancer treatment is more successful than it was ten years ago when it comes to helping patients live longer with a better quality of life, and when asked to name the most serious disease or health condition in the U.S. today, in their own words, almost half of Americans say cancer.

## FINDINGS

During his 2016 State of the Union Address, President Obama announced a National Cancer Moonshot initiative that would dedicate \$1 billion toward efforts to “eliminate cancer as we know it.”<sup>2</sup> The Moonshot aims to “bring about a decade’s worth of advances [to prevent and detect cancer] in five years” using nearly \$200 million in funding appropriated to the National Institutes of Health in fiscal year 2016 and more than \$750 million requested by the agency for fiscal year 2017.<sup>3</sup>

When told about the National Cancer Moonshot and asked whether a 20 percent increase in federal research funding for cancer is too much, too little, or about right, nearly half (46%) of Americans say they believe it is about right and more than a third (37%) believe the increase should be greater (*Figure 1*). Only one in ten (10%) adults believes a 20 percent increase in research funding is too much. This support did not differ significantly by political party — a rarity in an era of staunch partisan polarization that often centers on the federal budget and government expenditures.

FIGURE 1. Percent of adults in the U.S. who believe a 20 percent increase in federal research funding for cancer is too much, too little, or about right.



<sup>1</sup> White House, “Fact Sheet: Investing in the National Cancer Moonshot,” February 1, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/01/fact-sheet-investing-national-cancer-moonshot>

<sup>2</sup> White House, “Remarks of President Barack Obama – State of the Union Address As Delivered,” January 13, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>

<sup>3</sup> White House, “Fact Sheet: Investing in the National Cancer Moonshot.”

## TREATMENT EFFICACY

The poll also asked Americans to reflect on the efficacy of cancer treatment and how it has or has not changed in the past ten years. Results indicate that most American believe cancer treatments have progressed substantially over the past decade, as two-thirds (67%) of adults in the U.S. believe cancer treatment today is more successful at helping patients live longer with a better quality of life than it was in the past (*Figure 2*). Only three percent of adults believe treatment efficacy has waned, while more than a quarter (27%) believes it has stayed about the same.

FIGURE 2. Percent of adults in the U.S. who believe cancer treatment today is more successful, less successful or about the same at helping patients live longer with a better quality of life, as compared to ten years ago.



## PERCEIVED SERIOUSNESS

Nearly half (47%) of American adults, when asked to name the most serious disease or health condition in the U.S. today in their own words, say cancer. As seen in *Table 1*, heart disease is the second-most serious disease or health condition, according to American adults — trailing cancer by a wide margin. And in third place, about one in twelve (8%) adults say diabetes is the most serious health condition of our time.

TABLE 1. Percent of U.S. adults who say the following are the most serious diseases or health conditions in the United States today.

Disease or Health Condition	
Cancer	47%
Heart disease	11%
Diabetes	8%
Obesity	6%
HIV/AIDS	6%
Alzheimer's disease	3%

This ranking stands in contrast to the leading causes of death in the United States, outlined in *Table 2*. Even though heart disease kills more Americans every year than any other disease or health condition — more than 610,000 attributable deaths in 2013, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)<sup>4</sup> — relatively few Americans believe it is more serious than cancer. The only disease

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “Leading Causes of Death,” February 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm>

where perceived seriousness aligns with the U.S. death rate is Alzheimer’s disease — the sixth leading cause of death nationwide and the sixth most pressing health threat among American adults.

TABLE 2. Number of deaths attributable to diseases or health conditions in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

<b>Leading causes of death</b>	
Heart disease	611,105
Cancer	584,881
Chronic lower respiratory disease	149,205
Accidents (unintentional injuries)	130,557
Stroke (cerebrovascular diseases)	128,978
Alzheimer’s disease	84,767

## IMPLICATIONS

Cancer is perceived by American adults to be more serious than any other disease or health condition by a four-fold margin, even though it is the second leading cause of death in the nation. The magnitude of attention that cancer holds could account for why more than eight in ten (83%) Americans support a 20 percent or greater increase in cancer research funding — in line with that of the National Cancer Moonshot initiative, proposed by President Obama this year. This overwhelming support for increased research funding is likely driven by cancer treatment’s perceived increased efficacy, as two-thirds of Americans believe treatment is better at extending the longevity of patients and improving their quality of life than it was ten years ago. These views are shared by self-identified Democrats and Republicans alike, making increases in spending for cancer research a rare bipartisan fiscal issue.

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<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “Leading Causes of Death.”

## METHODOLOGY

This poll was conducted by *Stat* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Representatives of the two organizations worked closely to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results of the poll. *Stat* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health paid for the survey and related expenses.

The project team was led by Robert J. Blendon, Sc.D., Richard L. Menschel Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and Gideon Gil, Managing Editor, Enterprise and Partnerships of *Stat*. Harvard research team also included John M. Benson, Caitlin L. McMurtry, and Justin M. Sayde.

Interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 randomly selected adults, ages 18 and older, via telephone (including cell phones and landlines) by SSRS of Media, Pennsylvania. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. The interviewing period was March 2-6, 2016. The data were weighted to reflect the demographics of the national adult population as described by the U.S. Census.

When interpreting these findings, one should recognize that all surveys are subject to sampling error. Results may differ from what would be obtained if the whole U.S. adult population had been interviewed. The margin of error is  $\pm 3.7$  percentage points for the full sample of respondents.

Possible sources of non-sampling error include non-response bias, as well as question wording and ordering effects. Non-response in telephone surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population. To compensate for these known biases and for variations in probability of selection within and across households, sample data are weighted by household size, cell phone/landline use and demographics (sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, and region) to reflect the true population. Other techniques, including random-digit dialing, replicate subsamples, and systematic respondent selection within households, are used to ensure that the sample is representative.



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**STAT/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health Poll**

**Americans' Attitudes about Cancer**

This survey was conducted for *STAT* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health via telephone by SSRS, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted via telephone (cell phone and landline) March 2-6, 2016, among a nationally representative sample of 1,000 U.S. adults. More information about SSRS can be obtained by visiting [www.ssrs.com](http://www.ssrs.com)

	Number of interviews	Margin of Error (percentage points)
Total U.S. sample	1000	+/-3.7
Half-sample A	479	+/-5.4
Half-sample B	521	+/-5.1

ST-01. What do you think is the most serious disease or health condition in the U.S. today?

Cancer (incl. breast cancer, prostate cancer, lung cancer, etc)	47
Heart disease/heart attack	11
Diabetes	8
Obesity	6
HIV/AIDS	6
Alzheimer's disease	3
Chronic obstructive respiratory disease (COPD)/chronic lower respiratory disease/chronic lung disease (not cancer)/emphysema	2
Zika	2
Substance abuse/addiction	2
Flu/influenza	1
Mental health/mental illness	1
Stroke	*
Other	4
Don't Know/Refused	7

**(Asked of Half-Sample A; n=479)**

ST-02. The Obama administration has created a new program called the National Cancer Moonshot and asked Congress to increase federal research funding for cancer by roughly 20 percent. Do you think a 20 percent increase is too much, too little, or is it about right?

<b>Too much</b>	<b>Too little</b>	<b>About right</b>	<b>Don't know/ Refused</b>
10	37	46	7

**(Asked of Half-Sample B; n=521)**

ST-03. Compared to 10 years ago, do you think cancer treatment today is more successful or less successful at helping patients live longer with a better quality of life, or is it about the same?

<b>More successful</b>	<b>Less successful</b>	<b>About the same</b>	<b>Don't know/ Refused</b>
67	3	27	3