

Three years after WHO declared COVID a global emergency, Americans remain sharply divided over pandemic truths and myths

Trust in public health officials declined over the course of the pandemic, particularly among Republicans. Over the course of the pandemic, KFF polling has found a decline in trust of public health officials – most notably among Republicans. In 2022, majorities of Democrats continued to say they have at least a fair amount of trust in the CDC, the FDA, and Dr. Fauci, while less than half of Republicans had the same level of trust in public officials as they did at the beginning of the pandemic.

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Confusion and belief in misinformation about COVID-19 is common. Misinformation about health care topics is nothing new, but social media, the polarization of news sources, and the pace of scientific development on COVID-19 all contributed to an environment that made it easier than ever for misinformation and deliberate disinformation to spread. In late 2021, nearly eight in ten adults said they had heard at least one of eight different false statements about COVID-19 and that they believed it to be true or were unsure if it was true or false. Unvaccinated adults were more likely to report believing COVID misinformation than those who are vaccinated.

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Early gaps in COVID-19 vaccination rates between Black, Hispanic, and White adults were largely eliminated by the end of 2021. When COVID-19 vaccines first became publicly available in early 2021, Black and Hispanic adults were less likely than White adults to report being vaccinated. This gap reflected both difference in vaccine access, such as not having paid time off work to get vaccinated or not having a trusted place to get the vaccine, as well as concerns and questions about vaccine safety and side effects. Over time, as public health officials and community groups worked to provide access and offer answers to people’s questions, this gap narrowed and eventually closed. Recent surveys find that the share of Black and Hispanic adults who report being vaccinated is roughly equal to the share among White adults. In fact, the share of White adults who say they will “definitely not” get vaccinated has been higher than the shares among Black and Hispanic adults in most recent polls.

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Partisanship played a strong role in self-reported public health behaviors. Since the beginning of the pandemic, KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor surveys have found a strong relationship between partisanship and people’s willingness to take preventive actions to protect themselves and others from COVID-19. Democrats have been consistently more likely than Republicans to report wearing masks, social distancing, and getting vaccinated for COVID-19. Immunocompromised people, regardless of

partisanship, are also among the groups most likely to report taking precautions.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had broad impacts beyond health. The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on adults and children over the last three years. Whether it comes to their education, work, finances, mental or physical health, many – regardless of race, ethnicity and income – have reported feeling the negative effects of the pandemic. Parents are particularly likely to say their children have been negatively affected, with more than six in ten saying the pandemic has had a negative effect on their children's education and nearly as many saying the same about their children's mental health. About half of all adults say that the pandemic has had a negative effect on their own mental health, while four in ten say the same about their physical health and their financial situation.

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