

# Most washing hands, but only half social distancing following coronavirus advice

23 March 2020, by Dr Sabine L. Van Elsland, Andrew Scheuber



Professor Helen Ward led the study. Credit: Imperial College London

The vast majority of the UK public are washing their hands more regularly, but only half avoided crowded areas and social events over the past week.

The findings come in a report from the Imperial College London COVID-19 response team based on a YouGov survey of 2,108 UK adults on 17-18 March, commissioned by Imperial's Patient Experience Research Centre.

"The survey shows that most people are listening to government advice on handwashing, and indicate a willingness to self-isolate if needed. However, people were less convinced about the effectiveness of social distancing measures, and fewer were acting on these," said Professor Helen Ward of J-IDEA at Imperial College London, who led the research with Imperial's MRC Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis (MRC GIDA).

The survey was conducted following the landmark study led by Professor Neil Ferguson, Director of J-IDEA and MRC GIDA at Imperial, predicting the impact of multiple public health measures on slowing and suppressing the spread of [coronavirus](#)

## Public response to the outbreak

The [new Imperial survey](#) found:

- 77% reported being worried about the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK.
- 48% of adults who have not tested positive for COVID-19 believe it is likely they will be infected at some point in the future.
- 93% of adults reported personally taking at least one measure to protect themselves from COVID-19 infection, including:
  - 83% of adults washed their hands more frequently;
  - 52% avoided crowded areas;
  - 50% avoided [social events](#);
  - 36% avoided public transport;
  - 31% avoided going out;
  - 11% avoided going to work;
  - 28% avoided travel to areas outside the UK.
- There is high reported ability and willingness to self-isolate for seven days (based on the government recommendations up to 16 March) if advised to do so by a health professional (88%).
- Only 44% reported being able to work from home. This percentage was higher for higher, intermediate, junior managerial, administrative, professional, supervisory grade roles (60%) compared to skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled manual workers, state pensioners, casual grade workers and unemployed with state benefit (19%), reflecting less flexible job roles for manual and lower grade workers.
- 71% reported changing behavior in response to government guidance. This was lower (53%) for young adults (18-24 year-olds).
- Hand washing (63%), avoiding persons with symptoms (61%), and covering your sneeze

(53%) were more likely to be perceived as 'very effective' measures to prevent COVID-19 spread than common social distancing measures (avoiding going out (31%), to work (23%), to shops (16%) or to schools (19%).

### Coronavirus concerns

Professor Helen Ward of J-IDEA, the Abdul Latif Jameel Institute for Disease and Emergency Analytics at Imperial, said: "While it is encouraging that people are aware and taking some steps to protect themselves and others, there is a need for everyone to take far more action on social distancing if we are to stem the epidemic.

"Many people are unable to work from home because of the nature of their jobs, and these are often those with low household income and few savings. It is essential to ensure they are not left more vulnerable as a result."

Dr. Christina Atchison, principal clinical academic fellow in Imperial's School of Public Health, said: "Most people who responded to the survey stated that they would be able to self-isolate if they had symptoms of COVID-19. However, just over a third of people were concerned about the impact self-isolation would have on their mental health—it is important to address this potential issue early to support those vulnerable."

Dr. Leigh Bowman, teaching fellow in Imperial's School of Public Health, said: "These figures show that while the UK public is willing to self-isolate, 78% of people in lower social grades state they cannot work from home. So if they do become unwell, they may have to choose between taking (un)paid leave or working for as long as they can, which would increase the risk to those around them. Therefore we welcome the news by the Government to support the entire labor market, regardless of social grade."

"Overall, the British Public has readily adopted new behaviors to halt the transmission of COVID-19. However, when we look at the figures by age, it appears that younger age groups may not be doing as much as they can—this could be because they

are less worried or that public health messages simply aren't reaching them. In either case, we need to reverse this trend."

Jeffrey W Eaton, senior lecturer in HIV epidemiology at Imperial, said: "These results show that people are listening to government guidance and want to do their part to contain COVID-19—messages about hand washing and catching your cough have gotten through. But the public need clearer and more direct guidance—and support—to effectively implement difficult social distancing measures."

Rozlyn Redd, a research associate at Imperial, said: "Given the finding that service and manual sector workers' cannot work from home but are willing to self-isolate, the new government measures to replace wages should significantly increase people's capacity to social distance and self-isolate and therefore reduce the transmission of COVID19."

Dr. Philippa Pristera, a research associate at Imperial, said: "This highlights the importance of engaging and involving communities in outbreak response planning to ensure infection control measures are understood, accepted and adopted."

**More information:** Full report: [www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/2020/03/20/coronavirus-survey-20-03-2020.pdf](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/2020/03/20/coronavirus-survey-20-03-2020.pdf)

Provided by Imperial College London

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