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PFAS And Public Opinion: Understanding The Gender Divide

By **Dennis Stolle and Jeffrey Longsworth** (February 28, 2020, 4:51 PM EST)

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS, are a family of chemicals that have been used in consumer products for more than a century. For companies and lawyers developing legal, regulatory and public relations strategies related to PFAS, it is critically important to understand public opinion and perceptions about these emerging contaminants.

To date, there appear to be few efforts to assess public opinion about PFAS — which is a bit surprising, considering the amount of press and regulatory/legislative activity they have generated, and now, a nationally released movie, “Dark Waters,” which chronicles some of the health and environmental threats that certain PFAS can present.

Public opinion is ultimately a driver of regulatory action, legislation and litigation. It also can impact strategies and community involvement in working to clean up contaminated properties or natural resources. And in the event of future litigation, public opinion will be crucial to jury selection and trial strategies.

ThemeVision and Barnes & Thornburg LLP, in a collaborative effort between lawyers and social scientists, have undertaken what may be the first ongoing program of public opinion polling about PFAS-related issues with legal, regulatory and policy implications. While our first round covered a wide range of topics, one of our interesting early findings is a gender difference in PFAS opinions.

Two-Step Survey Method

Based on an online survey of 500 male and female adults from across the nation, we found a pattern of statistically significant differences between men and women on fundamental views and opinions about PFAS.

We conducted our survey in two steps. In the first step, we asked participants questions about PFAS without telling them anything about PFAS. We designed this first step to measure preexisting knowledge and attitudes.

In the second step, we provided a neutral description of PFAS, their uses, benefits and risks, and regulation. Then we measured attitudes after participants had read the neutral description.

Step 1: PFAS Recognition

Before we told the participants anything about PFAS chemicals, we found that the overall, national recognition of PFAS chemicals was low. Only about 16% of the total sample indicated they had ever heard of PFAS chemicals. Interestingly though, of the 16% who had, men were twice as

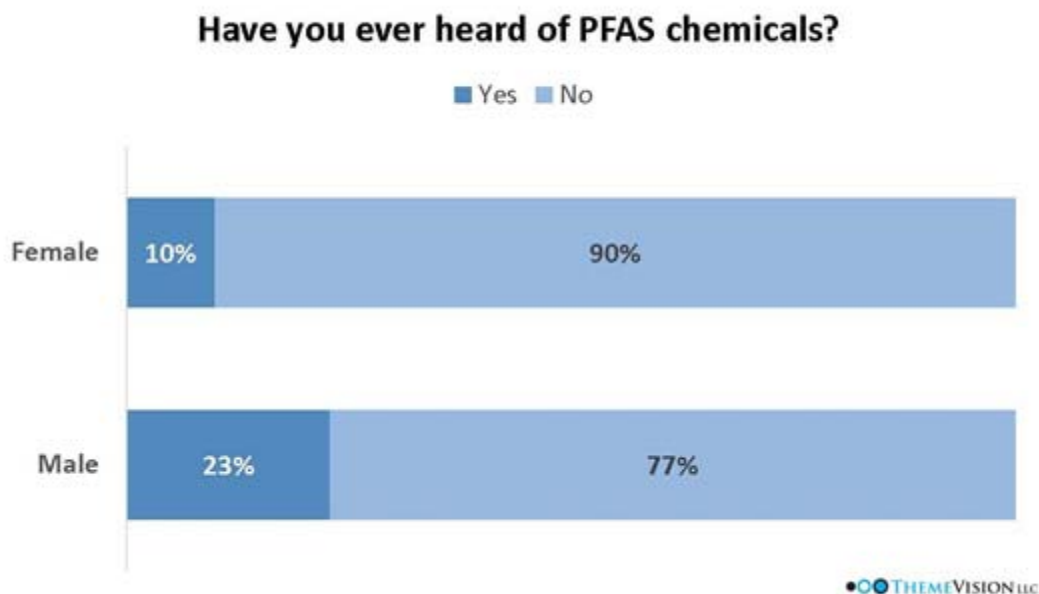


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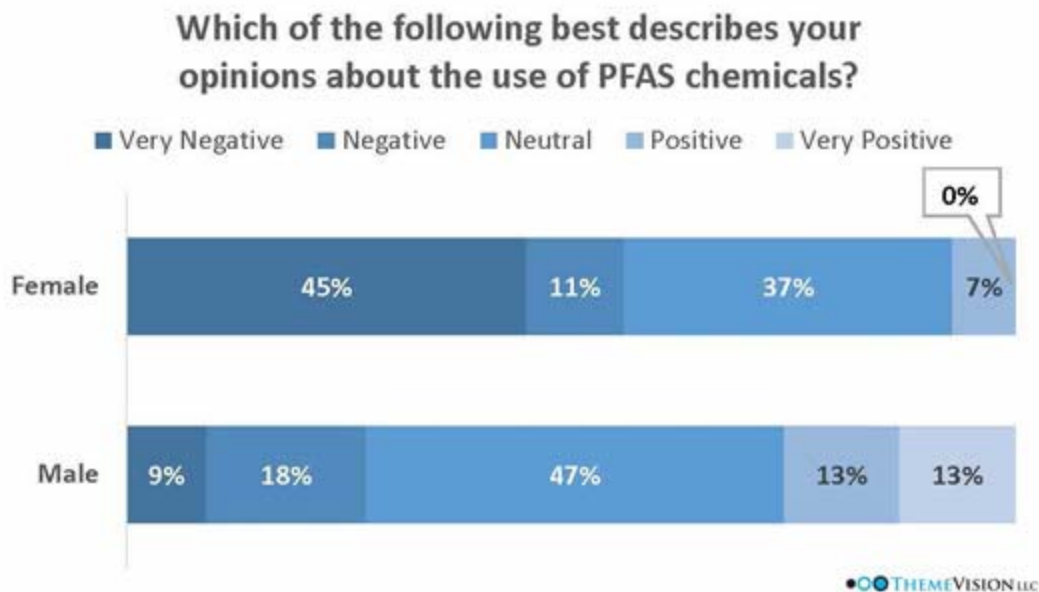


Jeffrey Longsworth

likely as women to report having heard of PFAS chemicals.



Of the 16% of people who reported having heard of PFAS chemicals, women were four times more likely to report “very negative” opinions about the use of PFAS chemicals. Zero women reported “very positive” opinions about the use of PFAS chemicals.



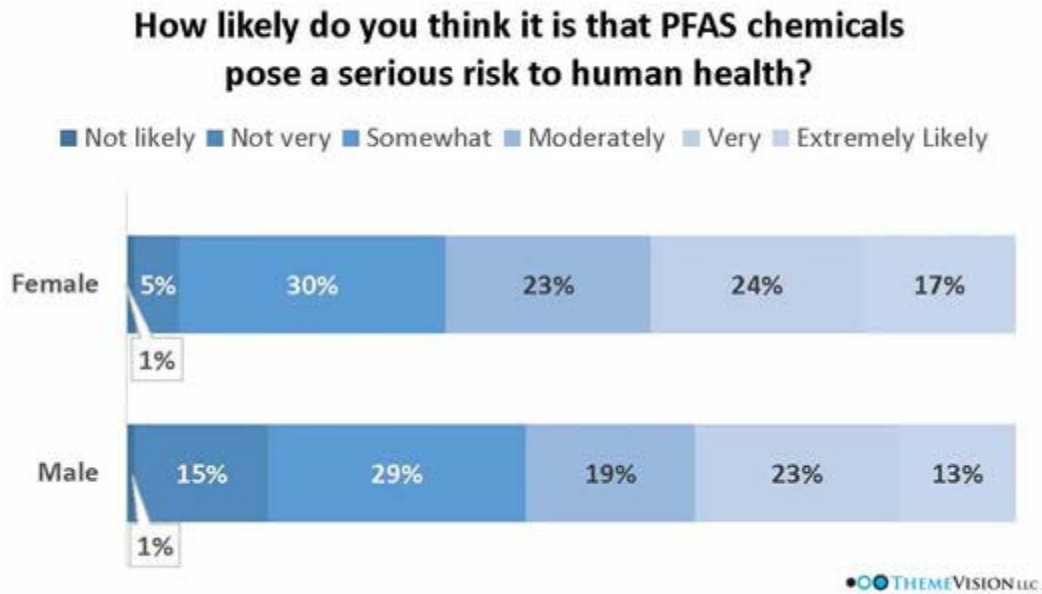
Step 2: Reactions to PFAS

In the second phase of the survey, we provided a neutral description of PFAS, their uses, benefits and risks, and emerging regulation.

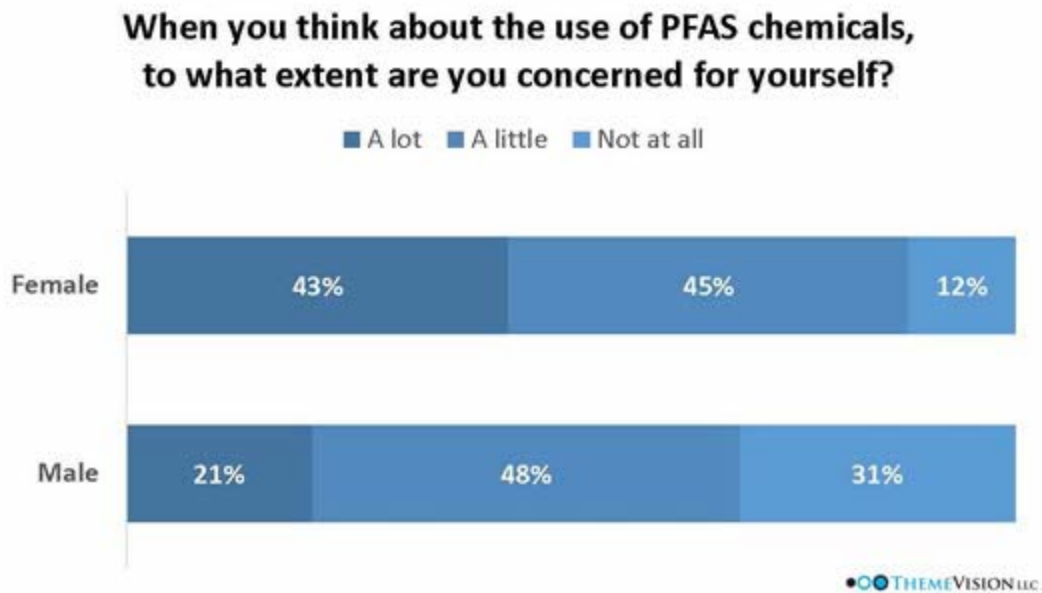
Perceived Health Risk

After reading the neutral description, women were more likely to believe that PFAS chemicals pose

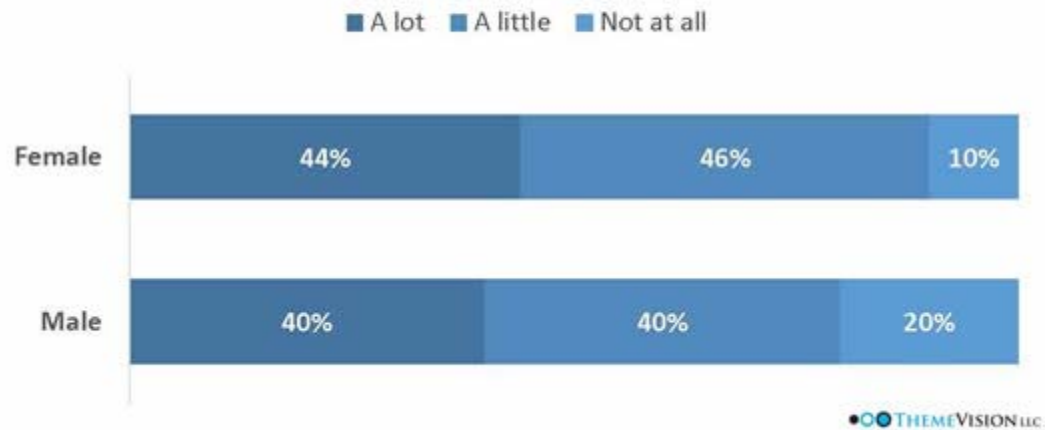
a serious risk to human health.



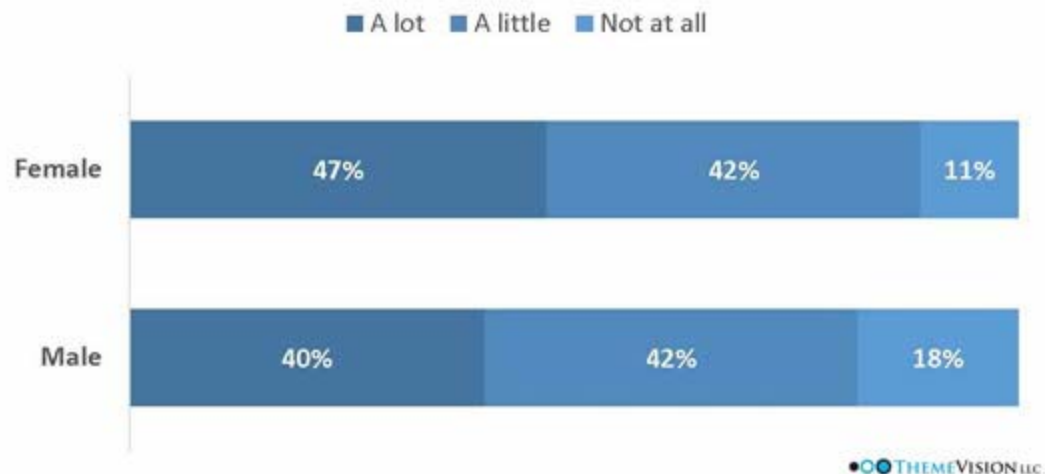
Women were more likely than men to express concern for their own well-being, as well as that of their communities and families.



**When you think about the use of PFAS chemicals,
to what extent are you concerned for your
community?**

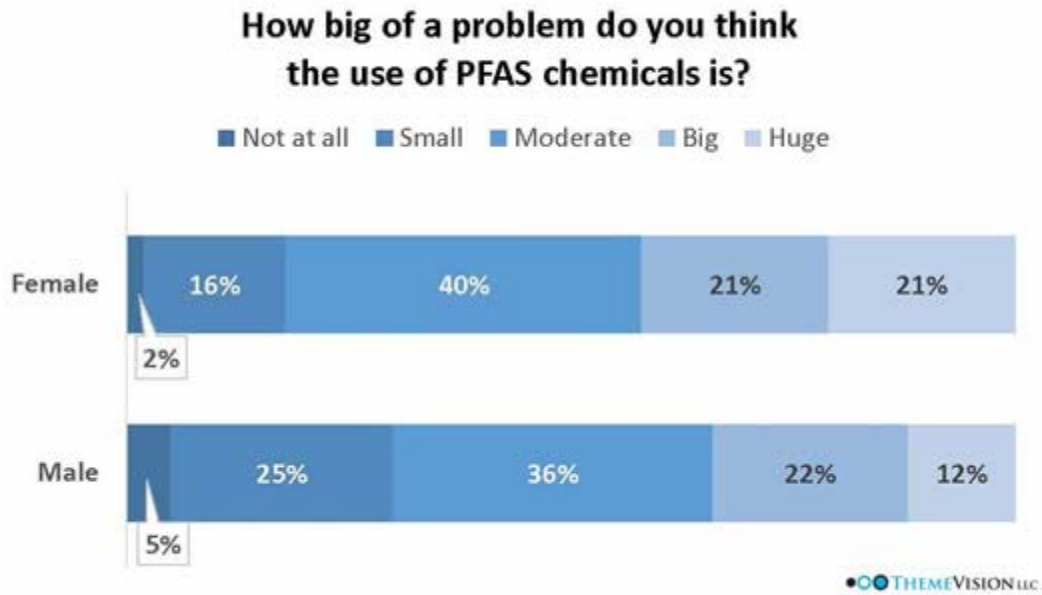


**When you think about the use of PFAS chemicals,
to what extent are you concerned for your family?**

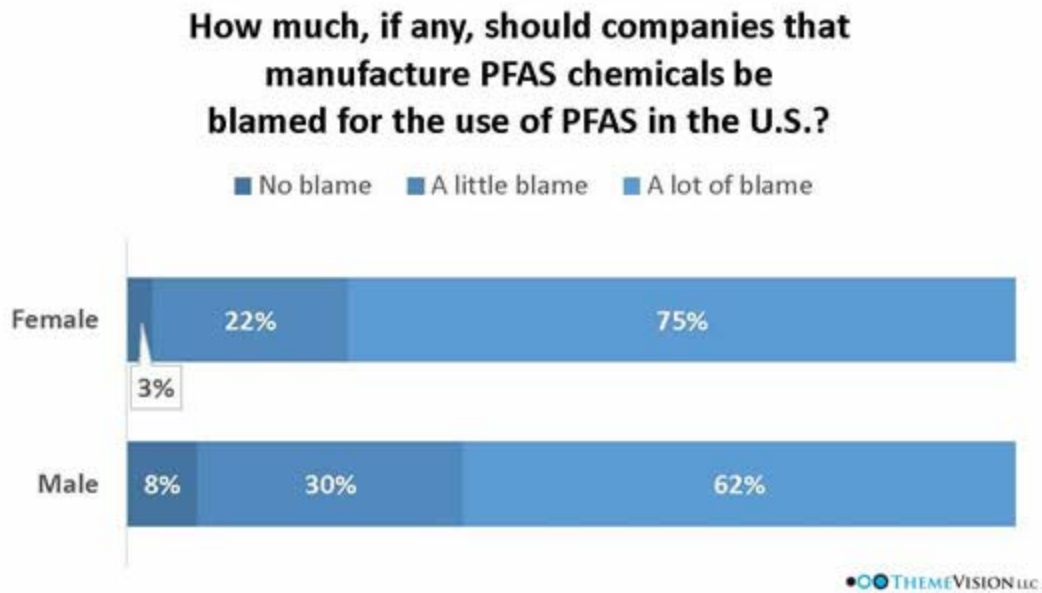


Magnitude of Issue

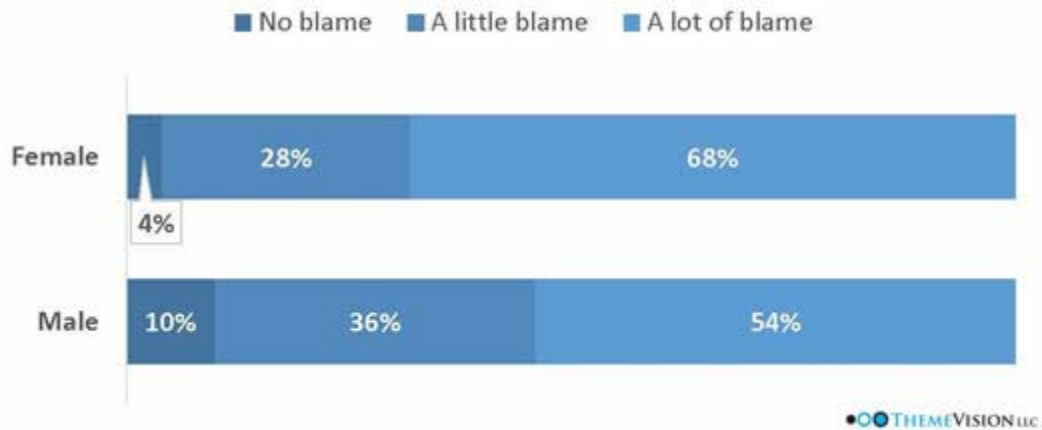
We also asked whether the respondents thought the use of PFAS chemicals was a problem, and the magnitude of the problem. Women were significantly more likely to perceive the use of PFAS chemicals as being a substantial problem.



We then asked respondents who they blame for the use of PFAS in the United States. Women were significantly more likely than men to place more blame on companies that manufacture PFAS chemicals and companies that use PFAS chemicals in products they manufacture.

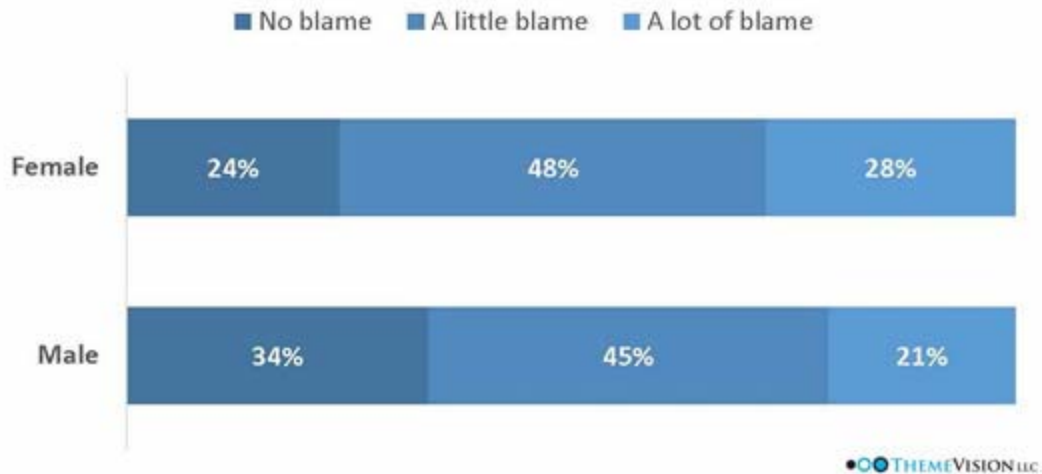


How much, if any, should companies that use PFAS chemicals in products they manufacture be blamed for the use of PFAS in the U.S.?



Women were also somewhat more likely than men to blame scientists.

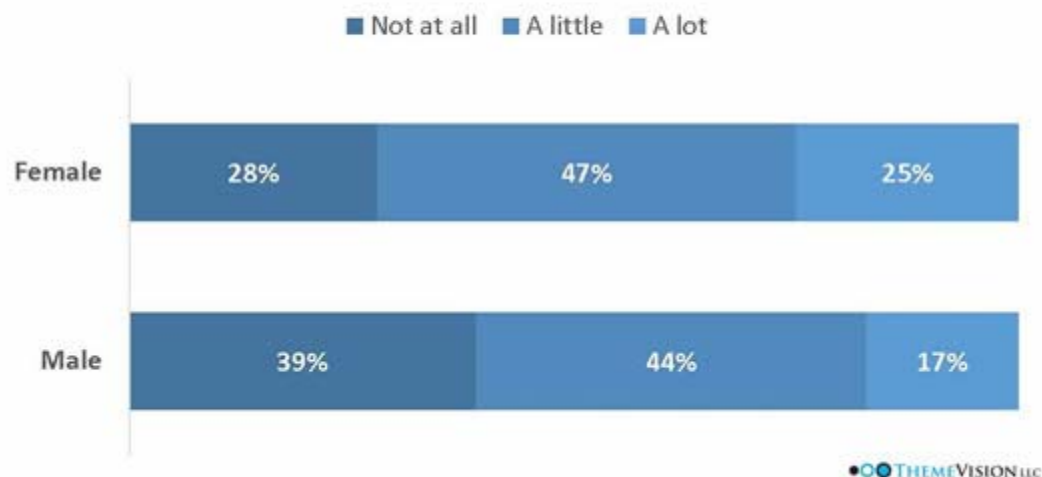
How much, if any, should scientists be blamed for the use of PFAS in the U.S.?



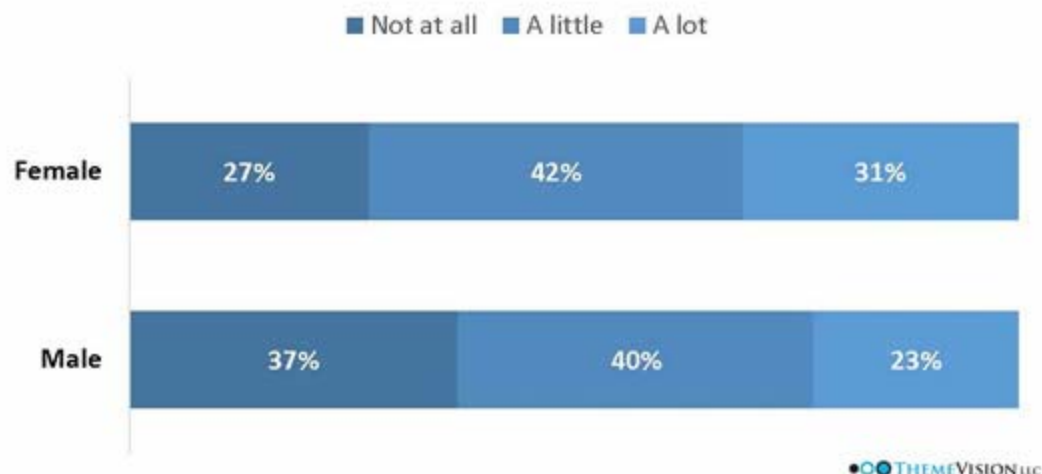
Emotions Linked to PFAS

Women were significantly more likely than men to report feeling sadness and anger when thinking about PFAS.

When you think about PFAS to what extent do you feel sad?



When you think about PFAS, to what extent do you feel angry?



Conclusion

When the public feels their safety or health is threatened by the use of a chemical, there is often a public outcry for a solution. While PFAS are getting some attention in the media and in state and local agency settings, that attention is likely to grow.

This is the first of an ongoing effort by ThemeVision and Barnes & Thornburg to assess evolving public opinion. The results show that at this time public recognition of PFAS remains low. But once exposed to a balanced discussion about the use of PFAS, people tend to develop more negative than positive perceptions.

Interestingly, this is especially true of women as compared to men. This study also provides insight into a need to provide education to local communities if a company or organization has PFAS concerns or potential liabilities.

As the cleanups and other issues lead to litigation, jury selection could be influenced by the differing views of PFAS by women and men. However, many questions remain, such as whether opinions about PFAS vary by region or community, if they change when specific products or organizations are mentioned, and if they change over time as the public hears more media coverage of PFAS issues.

PFAS stories are increasingly populating the news and other media, and additional research is generating a better understanding about the various PFAS compounds and their potential risks. Scientists and other experts also are gaining an understanding of how the pathways to human exposure of the various PFAS compounds may affect the population's exposure and potential intake of these compounds.

In addition to media coverage, Congress and states are becoming more aggressive in regulating PFAS, so public awareness and understanding is bound to increase. We are continuing to work to understand these and other issues at the intersection of public opinion and PFAS policy, regulation and litigation.

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