

Many Americans approve of stem cell research for curing serious diseases

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University of Nevada, Reno, sociologist Mariah Evans, lead author of the study published this month, "US attitudes toward human embryonic stem cell research." Credit: Photo courtesy of Theresa Danna-Douglas, University of Nevada, Reno.

While research using human embryonic stem cells has roused political controversy for almost two decades, little has been done to scientifically assess American attitudes on the subject. New research from the University of Nevada, Reno provides decision-makers with a much clearer picture of how their constituents truly feel about the subject.

The study, "U.S. attitudes toward human [embryonic stem cell research](#)," published this month in the journal, *Nature Biotechnology*, was conducted by University of Nevada, Reno faculty members Mariah Evans (lead author) and Jonathan Kelley, who surveyed a large,

representative national sample of 2,295 respondents in 2009. Their most significant findings include:

- More than two-thirds of respondents approved of using therapeutic cloning ([nuclear transfer](#) of the patient's own genes) and [stem cells](#) from in vitro fertilized embryos to cure cancer or treat heart attacks, while only about one in six respondents did not approve. Therapeutic cloning remains banned in the United States today. About one in six respondents had mixed feelings or was undecided.
- Over two-thirds of respondents also approved of a newer, less-researched method – using modified adult cells as an alternative to using cells from in vitro fertilized embryos – if the use could cure cancer or treat heart attacks. Less than 15 percent did not approve. About one in five had mixed feelings or was undecided.
- Almost half (43 to 47 percent) of respondents also approve of use of therapeutic cloning, stem cells from in vitro fertilized embryos and stem cells from an adult to treat allergies, but slightly over one in four do not. And, 28 to 29 percent have mixed feelings or undecided in this regard. These findings indicate that while more respondents approve of the use of these methods for treatment of less-serious conditions than disapprove of it, the approval is not as strong as it is for using these methods to treat more serious conditions and diseases, such as cancer or heart attacks.
- Respondents were not as approving of use of these methods for cosmetic purposes, such as creating new skin to restore someone's youthful appearance. Almost one-half (45 to 50 percent) disapproved of this use, while only slightly more than

one-quarter (25 to 29 percent) approved of this use. About one-quarter had mixed feelings or were undecided.

- Respondents did not support human reproductive cloning, neither of themselves nor of a child who died, with almost three-quarters (71 to 73 percent) disapproving and only about one in 10 approving. About one in five had mixed feelings or was undecided.
- Respondents were quite evenly divided in their thoughts on animal cloning with slightly over a third approving, slightly over a third disapproving, and about one-quarter having mixed feelings or being undecided.

Evans, a sociologist, also found it interesting that the majority of respondents trusted their own judgment most when deciding on their approval or disapproval on [stem cell research](#) issues, rather than looking to their church or other authorities, such as governmental ethics committees.

"The vast majority, over two-thirds, said that in deciding whether it is right to allow these treatments, they would follow their own judgment," she said. "Only 4 percent gave greater moral weight to the Catholic Church than to themselves, and even among committed church-going Catholics, only about one in five defer to the church on these matters."

The study also revealed that despite the Catholic Church's firm opposition, support for the use of stem cell research for the cure or treatment of serious diseases was almost as strong among Catholic laity as among Protestants. Even those in the most disapproving demographic group, churchgoing fundamentalist women, were still more in favor than opposed.

More information: *Nature Biotechnology*
[www.nature.com/nbt/journal/v29 ... 6/full/nbt.1891.html](http://www.nature.com/nbt/journal/v29...6/full/nbt.1891.html)

Provided by University of Nevada, Reno

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