



Title **The Impact of Communications About Swine Flu (Influenza A H1N1v) on Public Responses to the Outbreak: Results from 36 National Telephone Surveys in the UK**

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Aim

To assess the association between levels of worry about the possibility of catching swine flu and the volume of media reporting; the role of psychological factors in predicting likely uptake of swine flu vaccine; and the role of media coverage and advertising in predicting other swine flu-related behaviors.

Conclusions and results

During the swine flu outbreak, uptake rates for protective behaviors and likely acceptance rates for vaccination were low. One reason might be the low level of public worry about catching swine flu. When levels of worry are generally low, acting to increase the volume of mass media and advertising coverage is likely to increase the perceived efficacy of recommended behaviors, which, in turn, is likely to increase their uptake. The percentage of 'very' or 'fairly' worried participants fluctuated between 9.6% and 32.9%. This figure was associated with the volume of media reporting, even after adjusting for the changing severity of the outbreak. However, this effect only occurred during the UK's first summer wave of swine flu. In total, 56.1% of respondents were very or fairly likely to accept the swine flu vaccine. The strongest predictors were being very worried about the possibility of oneself (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] 4.7, 95% confidence interval [CI] 3.2 to 7.0), or one's child (aOR 8.0, 95% CI 4.6 to 13.9) catching swine flu. Overall, 33.1% of participants reporting carrying tissues with them, 9.5% had bought sanitizing gel, 2.0% had avoided public transport, and 1.6% had sought medical advice. Exposure to media coverage or advertising about swine flu increased tissue carrying or buying of sanitizing hand gel and reduced avoidance of public transport or consultation with health services during early May 2009. Path analyses showed that media coverage and advertising had these differential effects because they raised the perceived efficacy of hygiene behaviors, but decreased the perceived efficacy of avoidance behaviors.

Recommendations

See link www.hta.ac.uk/project/2224.asp.

Methods

See link www.hta.ac.uk/project/2224.asp.

Further research/reviews required

1) While our results suggest that successfully communicating information about the efficacy of protective behaviors will increase the uptake of these behaviors, we are unable to specify the best techniques for providing information about efficacy. Additional research would help guide future communications campaigns. 2) Across all of the behavioral outcomes that we assessed, there was evidence that people from particular demographic groups were more inclined to engage in behavioral change. Our results showed that ethnicity, age, household size, health status, socioeconomic status, and gender all played a role in determining whether someone engaged in a given behavior or not. The complex mechanisms underlying these effects may have important implications for the ways to frame messages for these groups. Additional research to understand the reasons for and implications of these effects would be of value. 3) Since additional data from the surveys have become available (eg, potential outcome variables such as hand-washing data and actual vaccine uptake) we recommend further analysis of this data set. Similarly, the database would also allow a more detailed analysis of the content of media reporting to be used as a predictor of worry during the outbreak.