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When climate change becomes a health issue, are people more likely to listen?

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Framing climate change as a public health problem seems to make the issue more relevant, significant and understandable to members of the public -- even some who don't generally believe climate change is happening, according to preliminary research by George Mason University's Center for Climate Change Communication (4C).

The center recently conducted an exploratory study in the United States of people's reactions to a public health-framed short essay on climate change. They found that on the whole, people who read the essay reacted positively to the information.

Previous research conducted by Mason investigators and others, using people's beliefs, behaviors and policy preferences about global warming as assessed in a national survey, identified six distinct segments of Americans, termed Global Warming's Six Americas.

In the current research, 4C director Edward Maibach interviewed approximately one dozen people in each of the Six Americas after they read the brief essay on the human health implications of global warming. As expected, he found that members of the audience segments who already believe strongly that climate change is happening had a strong positive response to the new information, while people who are less sure if climate change is happening also found value in the information. Nearly half of the comments made by members of the "Disengaged" segment, for example, indicated that the essay reflected their personal point of view, was informative or thought-provoking or offered valuable

prescriptive information on how to take action relative to climate change. Moreover, about 40 percent of those people in the "Doubtful" segment had similar positive reactions to the essay.

"Re-defining climate change in public health terms should help people make connection to already familiar problems such as asthma, allergies and infectious diseases, while shifting the visualization of the issue away from remote Arctic regions and distant peoples and animals," says Maibach. "The public health perspective offers a vision of a better, healthier future—not just a vision of an environmental disaster averted."

The research, which was published in the latest issue of the *BioMed Central Public Health* journal, also provides clues about specific public health messages that might not be helpful (such as eating less meat) and points to examples or associations that might trigger counter-arguments and negative reactions.

"Many leading experts have suggested that a positive vision for the future, rather than a dire one, is precisely what has been missing from the public dialogue on climate change thus far," says Maibach. "We believe this survey is one step in shaping a way to talk about climate change that will reach all segments of the public—not just those who already are making behavioral changes."

More information: A copy of the full study can be found online at: www.biomedcentral.com/qc/1471-2458/10/299

Provided by George Mason University

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