

New infectious diseases -- what's the risk?

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With the current outbreak of swine flu, and in the absence of a vaccine or treatment at present, the only way to contain the virus is to get people around the world to take precautionary measures.

In a special editorial in the latest issue of Springer's *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, Johannes Brug, Arja Aro, and Jan Hendrik Richardus show that there are three key parameters that convince people to take precautions. Firstly, they need to be aware of the risk to them. Secondly, they need to believe that effective protective actions are available and have confidence in them. Lastly, communications about risk need to be carefully managed so that they express the actual risk accurately to prevent mass scares.

The authors review the importance of risk perception and show that for people to voluntarily take precautionary actions, it is essential that they are aware of and understand the risk. Indeed, risk perception is a key feature of many health behavior theories. On the one hand, unrealistic optimism about [health risks](#) is often observed in relation to familiar risks and can result in a false sense of security and lack of precautions. On the other hand, pessimism is more likely for new, unfamiliar risks that are perceived to be uncontrollable and may lead to unnecessary mass scares.

As a consequence, implementation of precautionary measures requires effective risk communication that leads to realistic perceptions of risk, as well as knowledge and skills to promote precautionary practices. The authors argue that [scientific knowledge](#) in the area of infectious disease control is limited. Looking at how risk is communicated, they show that,

in the early stages of a possible pandemic, risk perceptions and people's confidence in recommended protective actions depend on effective communications.

In the authors' view: "Risk communication messages that are not comprehended by the public at risk, or communication of conflicting risk messages will result in lack of precautionary actions, as will communications from a non-trustworthy source. However, risk communication messages are sometimes very quickly adopted by the media, possibly leading to an 'amplification' of risk information that may lead to unnecessary mass scares and unnecessary or ineffective precautionary action."

More information: Brug J, Aro AR, Richardus JH.(2009). Risk Perceptions and Behaviour: Towards Pandemic Control of Emerging [Infectious Diseases](#). International Journal of Behavioral Medicine. DOI 10.1007/s12529-008-9000-X

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