

Poor health? Easier for some to blame bad genes than change lifestyle

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Does knowing that genes are partly responsible for your health condition mean you are less likely to be motivated to find out about the benefits of behavioral changes? According to Dr. Suzanne O'Neill from the National Human Genome Research Institute/National Institutes of Health, and her colleagues, people on the whole are still interested in how health habits affect disease risk. However, those with the greatest need to change their behaviors are more likely to favor genetic explanations for their diseases and the more behavioral risk factors they have, the less likely they are to be interested in behavior change information. The study is published online in Springer's journal *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*.

The completion of the Human Genome Project has led to increased availability of genetic risk information linking gene variants to a number of common health conditions. There is some concern that this [genetic risk](#) information might prompt some individuals to give genetic causation undue importance while downplaying the contribution of well-known behavioral and environmental factors, leading to reduced motivation to make behavioral changes. This potential misinterpretation of genetic information may undermine public health efforts to promote the behavioral changes needed to prevent disease.

In order to identify the link between family history, behavioral risks and causal attributions for diseases and the perceived value of pursuing information emphasizing health habits or genes, the authors asked a total of 1,959 healthy American adults to complete a survey. The survey

assessed the participants' behavioral risk factors (physical activity, dietary habits, smoking, [alcohol consumption](#), sun exposure, multivitamin use and [body mass index](#)), family history, causal attributions for eight largely preventable diseases (diabetes, osteoporosis, heart disease, [high cholesterol](#), hypertension, lung, colon and skin cancers), and their preferences for one type of health information over another.

They found that the majority of participants recognized that health behaviors were more likely to cause ill-health than genetics. On the whole, they were more interested in behavioral health information than in genetic information to understand what affects their chances of getting certain conditions. However, as the number of behavioral risk factors increased, inclination to favor genetic explanations also increased.

The authors conclude: "Our findings highlight that, although most did not over-ascribe common health conditions to genetics or hold defensively biased causal attributions that would inhibit needed behavior change, those with the greatest need for behavior change are at most risk for responding defensively and devaluing behavior change information. One possible explanation suggested by the authors is that behaviorally at-risk participants may have prior experience seeking and applying standard behavioral advice without success. As a result these individuals may see less value in this information.

More information: O'Neill SC et al (2010). Preferences for genetic and behavioral health information: the impact of risk factors and disease attributions. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*.

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