

FDA's graphic cigarette images: Will they work?

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(Medical Xpress) -- Can graphic images persuade people to make lasting changes to their behavior? The answer, according to psychological research, is probably not.

Howard Leventhal, the Board of Governors Professor of [Health Psychology](#) at Rutgers, agrees that photos are in fact stronger than words, but that images may not lead to long-term behavioral effects. Leventhal states, “You don’t need a lot of threat to get something to happen as long as the threat is associated with a clear, simple plan of action. For cigarettes, it’s more complicated, you may need a more potent level to get people to change.”

Leventhal continues, “The problem that I had with [the new Food and Drug Administration cigarette warning labels is that] it isn’t as clear to me as it might be whether there was a specific plan for action that was linked to the images. In other words, you get people motivated but if you don’t provide some concrete and specific directions for behavior, they might habituate to the threat and go ahead and do it anyway.”

These extremely [graphic images](#), which include rotting teeth, blackened lungs, and a dead body, are intended to deter people from smoking. Paul Slovic, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, says these warning labels may “change the aura and image about smoking for young people who haven’t yet started to smoke or are in the early stages.” But these images are unlikely to change the behavior of current smokers.

In addition, according to Carol Tavris, social psychologist and author of a recent book on cognitive dissonance, “What we know from decades of social psychological research is that fear backfires.”

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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