

Study uses planning prompts to enhance vaccination rates

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(Medical Xpress) -- We all have good intentions, but sometimes we need a nudge to turn those intentions into actions. According to a new study, encouraging people to write down the date and time when they plan to get their flu shot increased the number of people who were vaccinated.

The results of the randomized [behavioral intervention](#) appear in the June 13 online issue of the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#). The research was supported by the National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health.

The researchers analyzed the effects of different reminder mailings sent to those employees of a large utility firm who were considered at risk for the [flu](#). All eligible employees received one of three possible reminder mailings that listed the times and locations of free on-site flu vaccination clinics. Past research has shown that reminder mailings are among the most cost-effective ways to increase patient compliance. In this case, those who were encouraged further to write down both the date and time when they planned to receive the vaccination had a significantly higher rate of vaccination than those who received the mailing listing only the times and locations of the clinics.

“These findings have the potential to strengthen efforts to improve public health by increasing vaccination rates, as well as other constructive health activities,” said NIA Director Richard J. Hodes, M.D. “This study shows that positive health effects can be achieved at a very low cost.”

Reminder mailings were sent to 3,272 employees who were age 50 or older or had chronic health conditions that increase the risk of flu-related complications. The control group received a mailing listing the times and locations of vaccination clinics. The first treatment group received a mailing that also prompted them to write down the date they planned to be vaccinated; the second treatment group received a mailing that prompted them to write down the date and time they planned to be vaccinated.

The overall vaccination rate among study participants in the control group was 33.1 percent. The rate in the date-plan group increased by 1.5 percentage points relative to the control group. The date-and-time-plan group had a 4.2 percentage point increase relative to the [control group](#).

“Converting good intentions into real behavior has proven very difficult. Most people know what they need to do to improve their health and have excellent intentions, but there is a huge gap between their intentions and what they then do,” noted Richard Suzman, Ph.D., director of NIA’s Division of Behavioral and Social Research, which funded the study.

Suzman noted that NIH has been focusing on several initiatives on the science of behavior change that may lead to cost-effective approaches. “In this study, the research expands the application of behavioral economics to the health care setting, focusing on individual models of decision-making and resulting in a meaningful improvement at zero cost. It suggests that making a very concrete plan to take a particular action can help turn the intention into action,” he said.

“Interestingly, the planning prompt was most effective among employees for whom on-site flu shots were only offered on a single day,” said lead author Katherine L. Milkman, Ph.D., of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. “For this group, forgetting to attend an on-site clinic once would mean forgoing the opportunity

altogether. Prompting these employees to write the date and time when they intended to receive their shot increased compliance by 27 percent.”

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