

During one of the earliest flu seasons, researchers share subtle strategy for promoting vaccination

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(Medical Xpress)— With the nation experiencing one of the earliest flu seasons since the winter of 2003, Matthew McGlone – an associate professor of advertising in The University of Texas at Austin's College of Communication – has discovered a subtle linguistic strategy for promoting vaccination.

The strategy is to assign the causality or "agency" for transmission to the flu rather than to people. In other words, instead of telling people that they are at risk of contracting the flu, tell people that the flu is likely to infect them.

"Framing flu transmission in terms of virus agency is the way to go," McGlone said. "If [educational materials](#) focused more on virus agency, I think more people would be convinced to get flu vaccines."

Co-authored by McGlone, University of California at Davis Professor Robert Bell and College of Communication graduate students Joseph McGlynn and Sarah Zaitchik, the study appears in the December 2012 edition of the *Journal of [Health Communication](#)*.

The research group conducted the study in October 2009 during the H1N1 scare. Analyses were based on 222 undergraduate students who read one of four fact sheets with information adapted from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) H1N1 website.

Researchers created four versions of fact sheets by manipulating two characteristics: agency assignment language (human agency versus virus agency) and virus image (a literal image of the virus versus an image portraying the flu as a creature with a mouth and sharp teeth).

Participants who read a fact sheet that assigned agency to the flu (e.g., H1N2 may infect millions) felt more fearful of the virus and perceived it as more severe. When participants viewed a fact sheet that assigned agency to the flu and included a literal image of the virus, they felt more susceptible to the [flu](#).

In contrast, participants who read a fact sheet that assigned agency to people (e.g., Millions may contract H1N1) viewed the virus not as a combatant but as a consequence of social contact within readers' control, leading to lower perceived threat and susceptibility.

More information: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23216010

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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