

# Warning! Warning labels can be dangerous to your health

January 16 2014

---



Many products, like cigarettes and medications, are stamped with warning labels alerting consumers to their risks. Common sense suggests these warnings will encourage safer choices.

But now Dr. Yael Steinhart of Tel Aviv University's Recanati Business School, along with Prof. Ziv Carmon of INSEAD in Singapore and Prof. Yaacov Trope of New York University, has shown that [warning labels](#) can actually have the opposite effect. When there is a time lag between reading a warning and then buying, consuming, or evaluating the associated products, the warnings may encourage trust in the manufacturers of potentially dangerous products, making them less

threatening. Published in *Psychological Science*, the study findings could help improve the efficacy of warning labels.

"We showed that warnings may immediately increase concern and decrease consumption," said Dr. Steinhart. "But over time, they paradoxically promote trust in a product and consequently lead to more positive product evaluation and more actual purchases." The findings have important implications for regulators and managers in fields including consumer products, healthcare, and finance.

## **The best laid plans**

The study is based on an idea called "the construal-level theory" (CLT), developed by Prof. Trope and Prof. Nira Liberman of TAU's School of Psychological Sciences. When thinking about objects over a period of time, people tend to construe them abstractly, emphasizing what they describe as "high-level features" and suppressing "low-level features." The high-level feature of warning labels is that they build trust in consumers by creating the impression that all the relevant information about the products is being presented. The low-level feature of warning labels is that they make consumers more aware of the products' negative side effects.

The CLT holds that over long periods of time, consumers deemphasize side effects and emphasize the feeling of trust communicated by warnings over time. Ironically, this may increase the purchase, consumption, and assessment of the associated products.

## **Absence makes the heart grow fonder**

To test this prediction, the researchers ran a series of experiments. In one experiment, they showed smokers one of two ads for an unfamiliar

brand of [cigarettes](#): either with or without a health warning. When smokers were told the cigarettes would arrive the next day, the warning worked – decreasing the number of cigarettes purchased by an average of 75 percent compared to a group that was not shown the warning. But when smokers were told the cigarettes would arrive in three months, the warning backfired – the number of cigarettes purchased increased by an average of 493 percent compared to a group that was not shown the warning.

In another experiment, the researchers showed women ads for an [artificial sweetener](#), again either with or without a [health warning](#). When women were given the chance to order the sweetener right away, the warning worked – decreasing the packages of sweetener ordered by an average of 94 percent compared to a group that was not shown the warning. But when women were given the chance to order the sweetener just two weeks later, purchases increased by 265 percent compared to a group that was not shown the warning.

Consumer entities that want to minimize the deterrent effects of warnings would be better off building in a delay of some sort than burying the warnings in fine print, the researchers say. But those who genuinely want to inform customers of risks should ensure warnings are seen, or repeated, shortly before products are bought or consumed.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

Citation: Warning! Warning labels can be dangerous to your health (2014, January 16) retrieved 6 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-01-dangerous-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.