

# Tracing trends could lead to better public health education

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The educated members of a population are the trailblazers of risky behavior, but they are quicker to change their habits once the consequences of that behavior become better understood, according to new research from Penn State, which could also have implications on how public health education is approached.

Using a Population Education Transition (PET) curve that illustrates the process of education and behavior change, could lead to a better way to identify and plan [public health](#) responses to new health risks in a population, as is published in the journal *Demography*.

"Many don't realize it was the more educated portion of populations that spread the popularity of cigarettes in the United States in the 1940s to 1960s and sometime later in China and the virus at the beginning of the terrible HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. The more educated populations in Latin American were early major consumers of fast food and high sugar diets as these products became available," said David Baker, professor of sociology, education, and demography at Penn State.

"This early adoption process served to popularize the new health risks in these populations, but as more information was discovered and shared with the public, educated individuals were much more likely to respond by changing their behavior for the better."

Using a PET curve, researchers were able to establish that risky products and lifestyles were being used in a [population](#) and eventually would lead

to devastating [health consequences](#) for less educated people (pull chart from paper). The researchers looked at studies in markets around the world and found the same pattern: It was the more educated who were most likely to engage in these behaviors and suffer health consequences when these "risks" were relatively new in populations.

"The well-educated became early adopters of the risky behaviors and set the trend which others followed, but when more information—such as impact on health—became available, they were also the ones to rapidly re-adjust their lifestyles or eliminate these behaviors," Baker said. "This makes them risk prevention trendsetters, too."

The researchers suggest using the data learned from the PET curve may turn approaches to future public health messages on their head. Right now the usual strategy is to get very simple messages out, usually only after the dangers are clear. Since the educated, once armed with accurate information, can start the change to less risky use, the best approach may be to start informing the public about new dangers early, even if the message is more complicated.

"Our results suggest that it may be best to get more comprehensive information out first to the more educated," said Baker. "The faster public [health](#) educators can reach the tipping point where risky trendsetters become preventions trendsetters, we find it takes less time to fix the problem."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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