

Study finds risk communication targeting younger adults may have biggest impact

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Credit: Mark König

A recent study of adults in the United States finds that—broadly speaking—the older you are, the more concerned you are about COVID-19, and the more steps you take to reduce your risk from COVID-19. The study suggests that the biggest boost in risk reduction would stem from communication efforts aimed at raising awareness of COVID-19 risks among U.S. adults under the age of 40.

"Our study reinforces the idea that different generations perceive the risks associated with COVID-19 very differently," says Yang Cheng, corresponding author of the study and an assistant professor of communication at North Carolina State University. "It also highlights the need to do more to communicate the need for [preventive measures](#) to [younger generations](#)."

For this study, researchers conducted a survey of 1,843 adults across the U.S. The survey was conducted in April 2020 and focused on how study participants perceived risks associated with COVID-19 and what they were doing to reduce those risks. Researchers broke the study participants into four generational groups when analyzing the survey data. [baby boomers](#) were those study participants who were 55 years old or older at the time of the survey. Generation X was aged 40-54. Generation Y was 25-39. Generation Z was 18-24.

The researchers found that baby boomers perceived COVID-19 to pose the greatest risk, which is not surprising given that the emphasis at the time of the survey was largely on the risk the disease posed to [older adults](#). Generations X and Y were next, and had very similar assessments of risk. Generation Z had the lowest perceived views of risk associated with COVID-19.

When it came to risk-reduction behaviors—such as wearing a mask and social distancing—baby boomers were again the most cautious; on average they did the most to reduce their risk. Generation X engaged in the second most risk-reduction behaviors. Generations Y and Z engaged in about the same number of risk-reduction behaviors.

The researchers also looked at how perceptions of risk influenced risk-reduction behaviors in each age group. And there were big differences here.

For example, baby boomers who perceived COVID-19 to be a low risk still took far more precautions than people in Generation Y or Generation Z who perceived COVID-19 to be a low risk. In other words, there was a big difference between people in different generations who thought COVID-19 wasn't dangerous to them. However, that gap narrowed considerably when people viewed the risk as being more significant—until there was very little generational gap in risk-reduction behaviors for people who felt COVID-19 posed a serious risk.

"Persuasive health messages tailored for these younger generations, to increase their level of perceived risk, could encourage them to engage in more risk reduction—and help us reduce the spread of the disease," Cheng says.

"It would also be valuable to run this survey again to see how attitudes and behaviors have evolved over the past year," Cheng says. "What's changed? I'd also like to explore issues related to vaccination."

The paper, "The Moderating Effects of Perceived Severity on the Generational Gap in Preventive Behaviors during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S.," is published [open access](#) in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

More information: Yunjuan Luo et al. The Moderating Effects of Perceived Severity on the Generational Gap in Preventive Behaviors during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S., *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph18042011](#)

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