

Those with accurate information maintained safe distances for fear of contracting the virus

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If the COVID-19 virus mutates beyond Omicron, getting people to practice social distancing will require more than threats about long-term

health issues or death.

Older nonstudents maintained safe distances because they received [accurate information](#) and felt threatened about contracting the virus, according to a new University of Michigan study that looked at U.S. trends during the early months of COVID-19.

Public health officials have offered guidance on criteria and methods for effective distancing, such as minimizing face-to-face interactions, keeping the adequate distance at gatherings and prioritizing online [social connections](#). However, wide variation exists in the extent to which people have followed this guidance, said Soyeon Choi, a [graduate student](#) in psychology and the study's lead author.

But studies have pointed to the contributions of knowledge and affect (feeling threatened) in judgments of risk and health-related decision-making, such as receiving vaccinations, getting health screening and handwashing.

U-M researchers sought to answer questions about what predicated changes in social distances over time and how it differed between [college students](#) and older non-students.

For older nonstudents, both feeling threatened and being informed independently predicted more social distancing, the study showed. Students practiced distancing when they felt threatened by COVID-19 but being more informed about the virus did not influence distancing behaviors

"It is possible that students' focus on interpersonal sources such as friends and [social media](#) may have produced less accurate and credible information," Choi said.

Overall, the researchers determined that for immediate or short-lived events, emphasizing threat may be somewhat useful. However, for extended events involving many information seeking and decision-making steps, interventions that improve attention to accurate sources of knowledge may have a greater impact.

The researchers admit pandemic behaviors have changed since the data had been collected in 2020.

"This study was focused on behavior early in the pandemic, when uncertainty was much higher, and I do think that people's behavior has evolved since then," said study co-author Joshua Ackerman, associate professor of psychology. "Of course, [social distancing](#) is still very important (especially with the emergence of new variants), but some evidence suggests that people are less willing to keep up with distancing due to pandemic fatigue."

Still, the findings can still be informative for designing content for health behavior interventions, not having a "one size fits all" approach, Choi said.

The study's other author was Wilson Merrell, a graduate student in psychology. The findings appeared in the *Journal of Health Psychology*.

More information: Soyeon Choi et al, Keep your distance: Different roles for knowledge and affect in predicting social distancing behavior, *Journal of Health Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/13591053211067100](https://doi.org/10.1177/13591053211067100)

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