New study reveals how fear and vaccine hesitancy could fuel conspiracy beliefs

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New research has shown that fear around vaccination can increase vaccine hesitancy, where conspiracy beliefs may then be used to justify not vaccinating, with these findings likely helping to inform more effective public health messaging.
Dr. Daniel Jolley, from the University of Nottingham's School of Psychology, along with Dr. Lee Shepherd and Anna Maughan from Northumbria University, found that that fear of vaccines directly reduces people's intention to get vaccinated.

When people feel hesitant about vaccines due to fear, they could be more likely to adopt conspiracy beliefs as a way to justify their unwillingness to get vaccinated. The results have been published in *Psychology and Heath*.

The team conducted three online studies with almost 1,000 participants to explore how fear may influence people's willingness to receive a vaccine and also examine how fear influences anti-vaccine conspiracy beliefs.

"The whole issue of vaccine hesitancy is complex with many factors at play, but we do know that conspiracy beliefs can have an effect on a person's reasoning. We wanted to explore whether fear was linked to this.

"We initially thought that fear would increase conspiracy beliefs, leading to people being less willing to receive a vaccine. When our results didn't support this, we considered a different explanation and collected more data.

"We tested whether fear directly causes vaccine hesitancy and if conspiracy beliefs emerge as a way to justify avoiding vaccines," says Dr. Jolley.

To explore this theory, the researchers gave participants information on a fictional disease, and then a statement from an expert that either told them they should or shouldn't be fearful of the vaccine—the information about the vaccine itself was the same. Participants were then asked
questions about the vaccine and given conspiracy type statements to either agree or disagree with.

"These findings highlight the crucial role of emotions, especially fear, in shaping attitudes toward vaccines and the emergence of conspiracy beliefs," said Dr. Jolley, "Understanding this emotional component can help design more effective public health strategies to increase vaccine uptake."

Based on the research, the team have made the following recommendations which could help improve vaccine uptake:

- **Address Emotional Drivers**: Public health campaigns should address the emotional aspects of vaccine hesitancy. Finding ways to reduce fear may make people less likely to believe conspiracy theories.
- **Effective Emotion Management**: It is important to develop and promote strategies to help people manage their emotions. People can manage their emotions in different ways. Some of these ways are more beneficial than others. It is important to help people find beneficial ways to manage their fear towards vaccines.
- **Target Fear Specifically**: Interventions should focus on reducing fear related to vaccines. This could involve providing reassuring information about vaccine safety and efficacy. Information could also address common fears and share positive vaccination stories.

"Public health initiatives should focus on the emotional roots of vaccine hesitancy and conspiracy beliefs. This is likely to be effective in encouraging vaccination and safeguarding public health. Addressing fear, in particular, can reduce the tendency to justify vaccine avoidance with conspiracy theories and help build a more trusting and well-informed society," says Dr. Jolley.

Provided by University of Nottingham

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