Using behavioral economics to increase flu vaccination rate

Seasonal flu imposes an enormous burden on society every year, yet many people refuse to obtain flu shots due to misconceptions about the risks and effectiveness of flu vaccines. These misconceptions include the beliefs that the vaccines do not work, that the vaccines cause the flu, and that vaccination is not necessary because one is at low risk of getting infected. We drew on recent research in psychology and behavioral economics to explain where these vaccine misconceptions come from and to provide suggestions regarding how they can be corrected.

A large body of scientific literature has shown that people commit many systematic errors in processing information and in making decisions. Moreover, these information processing and decision-making mistakes can show up in virtually all aspects of life and affect everything from how we view ourselves to how much we save for retirement. For example, people tend to be unrealistically optimistic about themselves—in many domains, most people believe that they are above average; people tend to overestimate the likelihood of memorable or vivid events (and underestimate the chances of more prosaic events occurring); and people have a tendency to want to see patterns in their surroundings or in what they do, even when orderly patterns do not exist.

We related these general findings about the common mistakes that many people make in processing information about themselves and the world around them to misconceptions about the flu vaccine. These findings suggest that simply giving people more information about the risks and efficacy of vaccines may not be effective in getting them to seek vaccination. Indeed, recent studies have shown that such a strategy can backfire and lead to greater distrust of vaccines.

Instead, recognizing that people's situations and understanding of flu shots can differ widely, we recommend methods that humanize the issue and employ a more personal, concrete approach. For instance, rather than describing the benefits of flu vaccinations in abstract, numerical terms, we suggest the use of vaccination campaigns that associate flu shots with real people that the target population recognize or can relate to—a strategy we refer to as 'put a face on it.' Recent 'get out the vote' efforts have shown this targeted approach can be an effective strategy to change people's voting behavior.

Because people often consider themselves to be above average in many aspects of life—and thus may think they are less susceptible to illnesses and diseases—it may be helpful to prompt them to think about their previous experiences with the flu or the experiences of those they are close to. Even relatively simple steps such as helping people plan more concretely when they will get a flu shot have been shown to be effective in raising the vaccination rate.

Based on the latest research in the behavioral sciences, we believe that adopting a more personal and humanistic approach that makes it easier for people to relate to the flu and its consequences would help increase vaccination rate.

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