

Sneezing Changes Minds on Health Care | Miller-McCune Online

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How to change minds about the need for health care reform? Get out your handkerchief.

[By Tom Jacobs](#)



Want to change someone's mind? Start sneezing. A recently published paper suggests minor, everyday events can have a major impact on our perception of risk — even influencing our attitude toward federal spending. (stockxpert.com) How afraid are you of suffering a heart attack? Or dying in an automobile accident? And how big of an overhaul does the American health care system really need?

Your answer to those questions may depend upon whether someone near you has recently sneezed.

A [paper](#) just published in the journal *Psychological Science* suggests minor, everyday events can have a major impact on our perception of risk — even influencing our attitude toward federal spending. Two studies conducted when swine flu fears were at their height found exposure to a sneeze was enough to shift people's views on a variety of health-related issues, including those only tangentially connected to communicable disease.

The studies, designed and carried out by a University of Michigan research team led by psychologists [Spike W.S. Lee](#) and [Norbert Schwarz](#), were both conducted in May 2009, while the threat of a swine flu pandemic was receiving major media attention. In the first, 50 University of Michigan students completed a one-page questionnaire, in which they estimated the odds of an “average American” experiencing certain health risks. They also evaluated the U.S. health care system on a 1-to-7 scale, from “we need to completely rebuild it” to “only minor changes are necessary.”

Half of those taking the survey had just walked by a peer who was sneezing and coughing. The others did not.

“Those who had just passed a sneezing confederate perceived the average American as more likely to contract a serious disease, to have a heart attack before age 50, and to die from a crime or accident,” the researchers report. They also “reported a more negative view of the health care system.”

In the second study, 47 pedestrians in Ann Arbor, Michigan took a survey asking whether they supported a proposed \$1.3 billion federal investment in vaccine development. Was this a good idea, or should the money be used to create green jobs?

After a passerby agreed to participate, the survey taker either did or did not feign a slight illness. With every second person, she “coughed and sneezed once while covering her mouth with her left forearm before handing the questionnaire to participants” with her right hand.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, people taking the survey under those conditions “were more likely than those in the control condition to favor federal spending on the production of flu vaccines,” the paper states.

The effects of sneezing were of “a moderate to large magnitude,” the scholars report, and the participants were entirely unconscious of their impact: “Debriefing suggested that people have no insight into these processes; they

assume that exposure to a sneeze may influence their perception of flu risk, but not their perception of unrelated risks.”

This could be useful information to lawmakers who fear further confrontations with constituents over health care reform. If appeals to logic, reason and empathy don't work at your next town hall meeting, simply start sneezing. You may change some minds.

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