

Research Snapshot

Young distrusting risk takers are less likely to see COVID-19 as a threat and follow physical (social) distancing measures

What is this research about?

Physical distancing measures may continue to be needed to contain the spread of COVID-19, especially since a second wave of the virus is expected. However, the public's adherence to physical distancing will likely weaken as the pandemic persists. Many factors, such as perception of the virus and types of physical distancing measures, have an impact on our decision to follow guidelines.

What did the researchers do?

In May of 2020, researchers conducted a web-based survey of Canadian adults aged 18 years or older, measuring how well people were following physical distancing restrictions. The researchers collected social, psychological, sociodemographic and clinical information to assess perceptions of COVID-19 and physical distancing.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers analyzed the data from 1019 participants broadly representative of the Canadian population with respect to age (average 46 years) and gender (50% female).

The findings show that:

- Canadian adults were generally following physical distancing measures
- Canadian adults perceived the current physical distancing restrictions to be feasible
- Canadian adults were more likely to follow physical distancing measures if they have adequate social support and trust in

What you need to know

In order to contain the spread of COVID-19, governments have put physical (social) distancing measures in place. Researchers conducted a web-based survey of Canadian adults to determine the key factors related to following physical distancing measures. These factors include:

- adequate social support
- trust in the government's management of COVID-19
- psychological factors, including:
 - risk and germ aversion
 - not believing one is infected with COVID-19
 - belief in holistic health
 - greater belief that they are responsible for their own success or failure.

government's management of COVID-19

- Psychological factors that help people follow physical distancing measures included risk and germ aversion, not believing one is infected with COVID-19, belief in holistic health (i.e., mindful of the effects of emotional well-being on physical health), and belief that they are responsible for their own success or failure
- Canadian adults were less likely to follow physical distancing measures if they were younger, male, or politically right-wing; have negative attitude towards authority; lack

conscientiousness; and do not know someone close who is an elderly or has an underlying health risk for COVID-19.

Limitations and next steps

The researchers noted some limitations to web-based surveys and research participation. Canadian adults without access to or familiarity with computers are not represented. Individuals who participate in research are also often more conscientious and willing to sacrifice their time, which may introduce bias in the sample.

Keywords

COVID-19; Coronavirus; Pandemic; Social distancing; Physical distancing; Infection prevention; Adherence

About the researchers

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This Research Snapshot is based on the article, "Modifiable Factors of Social Distancing Adherence: A COVID-19 Study" which is currently being considered for publication. [doi will be available soon].

How can you use this research?

This study identified special populations that may benefit from targeted public health interventions. It also outlined potential factors that may be important to address to help the public follow physical distancing measures. Recommendations include the provision of consistent, understandable, and transparent messaging around COVID-19 and public health interventions that include promoting social support services, addressing specific health beliefs, and enhancing health knowledge and awareness.

Suggested Public Health Interventions:

- Increase social supports
- Increase trust in government's management of the pandemic by providing consistent messaging across all levels of government
- Enhance awareness that a positive test is required to confirm if one is truly infected with COVID-19
- Increase knowledge of the risk of transmission without infection prevention measures
- Promote a holistic attitude where individuals are mindful of the effects of emotional well-being on physical health
- Increase awareness and understanding that there is no known remedy, medical or otherwise, to prevent or treat COVID-19. Infection prevention measures, including social distancing, are the best means to contain the spread of COVID-19 and to reduce the number of COVID-19 related deaths
- Promote individual sense of control over COVID-19 and its consequences
- Reminding the public of personal connections with individuals in later life or who have an underlying health condition.