

# Attitudes about health affect how older adults engage with negative health news

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

To get older adults to pay attention to important health information, preface it with the good news about their health. That's one takeaway from a study that found older adults are more willing to engage with negative health information when they have a positive attitude about their health.

"There's a lot of research showing that [older adults](#) prefer [positive information](#), often avoiding or ignoring negative information," says Tom Hess, a professor of psychology at North Carolina State University and co-author of a paper on the new findings. "That can have consequences for older adults, particularly when it comes to information regarding their health. We wanted to see if there was a way to overcome this positivity bias when it comes to health news."

To that end, the researchers conducted a study of 196 adults between the ages of 65 and 80. A quarter of the study participants were shown images to put them in a [negative mood](#). A quarter were shown images to put them in a positive mood. A quarter were asked to complete a health [checklist](#) designed to make them feel bad about

the healthiness of their lifestyle choices. And a quarter were asked to complete a checklist designed to make them feel good about their lifestyle choices.

Study participants were then shown the headlines of six articles about health. Three of the headlines were negative, but offered information relevant to the health of the study participants. The other three headlines were positive, but were less likely to provide participants with useful information. Participants were asked to pick any three of the six articles to read.

Study participants who completed the "positive" health checklist read more than 50 percent more of the articles that had negative headlines, as compared to participants who completed the "negative" checklist.

"Specifically, study participants who completed the checklist giving them a positive [attitude](#) toward their health chose to read, on average, about 60 percent of the negative articles, whereas participants who completed the negative checklist chose only 37 percent of the negative articles," says Claire Growney, a Ph.D. student at NC State and lead author of the paper. "There was no effect for participants who did not complete the health checklist and whose moods were only influenced by images. We also ran the same study with a group of 201 younger adults, and there was no effect with any of the groups there. This tells us that having a [positive attitude](#) toward health may primarily affect the willingness of older adults to engage with negative health news.

"We also asked the study participants what their motivations were before reviewing the health articles, and found that older adults with positive attitudes toward their health were more likely to seek out health-related news that was relevant to their own lives."

To confirm the finding, the researchers repeated the study with 199 adults between the ages of 65 and 85. This time they focused solely on the negative and positive health checklists. One difference with this second study was that the health [article](#) headlines were split into four categories: positive and informative; negative and informative; positive and not informative; and negative and not informative.

"In this second study, we found participants who completed the positive checklist were over 30 percent more likely to select articles with negative headlines to read—but only if the headlines were also informative," Grownney says. "Specifically, the group with positive attitudes toward their health again chose to read about 60 percent of the negative/informative articles, while the group with negative attitudes toward their health chose only about 40 percent of the negative/informative articles."

"These findings have practical value in terms of how we share negative [information](#) with older [adults](#) regarding their [health](#)," Hess says. "For example, it may be useful for a [health care provider](#) to say 'here's what looks good' before talking to a patient about recommendations regarding diet or exercise."

The paper, "The Influence of Mood Versus Relevant Self-Perceptions in Older Adults' Interest in Negative Health-Related Information," is published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

**More information:** Claire M. Grownney et al, The influence of mood versus relevant self-perceptions in older adults' interest in negative health-related information., *Psychology and Aging* (2019). DOI: [10.1037/pag0000333](https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000333)

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