Results from a Randomized Controlled Trial Testing the Effects of Routine Health Information Exposure on Cancer Prevention and Screening Behaviors

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Abstract:

Information scanning (defined as routine exposure to health information) has been shown to increase recommended cancer prevention and screening behaviors. This study extends prior observational research and examines whether scanning impacts cancer prevention and screening behaviors in an ecologically valid randomized controlled trial. A population sample of 50-70 year olds (N=15,824) was recruited through Survey Sampling International's opt-in panel. The dose of exposure to health information was varied through a year-long distribution of a monthly online health newsletter, where subscribers were randomly assigned to receive extra coverage of one of four focus behaviors: fruit and vegetable consumption, exercise, screening mammography and colorectal cancer screening (CRC). Coverage was not intended to be persuasive, but rather to reflect ordinary media coverage while respecting medical standards. Self-reported behavior was assessed at year end using OLS and logistic regression analyses. Results showed that among subscribers assigned to the fruit and vegetable newsletter condition versus control groups, the target behavior was higher at year end (0.24 servings per day). However, CRC was down 9.4% among those in the CRC condition versus control groups. In both cases, these effects were only present among subscribers who read their assigned newsletter more than half the time. There were no statistically detectable effects on exercise or mammography behaviors. Scanning, even when it involves a relatively low dose of extra information exposure (around 8 extra article exposures over one year) can either promote or undermine recommended behaviors. Possible explanations and implications for health communication research and practice are discussed.