

PRESS RELEASE

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Increasing Vaccination Intentions: Study Sheds Light on Potential Persuasive Power of the Social Environment

In view of declining vaccination numbers and increasing Covid-19 cases, politicians are urging the public to continue taking up vaccination offers. However, the number of daily administered first doses is currently declining because many people are still sceptical about immunisation. This also applies, among others, to people who are prone to conspiracy theories. Researchers at the Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM) in Tübingen have now discovered: even doubters are willing to get vaccinated – if their close social environment expects them to do so.

Just over half of the population in Germany has been fully vaccinated. Even though this quote is not yet sufficient to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of daily vaccinations is declining. There are many reasons behind peoples' refusal to get the jab. One factor that can lead to such a refusal is the influence of conspiracy theories surrounding the Covid-19 vaccines, which are circulating on social media. "The fact that people who believe in conspiracy theories are also more sceptical towards vaccinations has already been proven repeatedly in research and demonstrated in many countries," explains Dr Kevin Winter, research associate in the *Social Processes* lab at the IWM in Tübingen.

The Social Environment Influences Vaccination Intentions

In cooperation with the University of Queensland (Australia), Winter and other IWM researchers conducted five studies with over 1200 participants. For the first time, they were able to gain insights into how the negative influence of conspiracy theories on vaccination intentions could be reduced. "The crucial factor is the social environment," says project leader Winter. If friends and family signal positive attitudes and expectations, even people who are otherwise sceptical about vaccinations are more willing to get vaccinated. This holds true not only for immunisation against Covid-19 but also for other protective vaccinations such as TBEV ("tick-borne encephalitis virus").



Dr. Kevin Winter/©IWM Tübingen, Paavo Ruch

Personal Conversations Reduce Vaccine Scepticism

Having said that, the IWM researchers point out that probably not everyone can be convinced by a conducive social environment. In assessing the study results, Winter acknowledges that "people who fundamentally reject vaccinations or are already deeply immersed in a conspiratorial worldview are probably difficult to reach." Nevertheless, the findings can be used to derive useful recommendations for everyday life: Talking to acquaintances and relatives who express such concerns at an early stage could not only counteract the spread of conspiracy theories, but also increase their willingness to get vaccinated.

Link to study: <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjhp.12550>

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Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM)

The Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM) in Tübingen investigates how digital media influences knowledge and communication processes. Foundational and applied research focuses not only on institutional learning fields such as schools and universities, but also on informal learning on the Internet, at the workplace, or in museums. At the IWM, researchers from various disciplines work together, with many colleagues coming from the areas of psychology, communication science, neuroscience, and computer science.