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Low perceived risk: A challenge to adoption of preventive behaviors for COVID-19?

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Low perceived risk: a challenge to adoption of preventive behaviors for COVID-19?

India, with 13,387 cases reported as of April 17, currently accounts for just 0.6% of the COVID-19 cases worldwide. The nationwide lockdown may have helped contain the initial COVID-19 outbreak. However, until testing rates improve, the size of the outbreak remains unclear, and the risk of spread remains. It is critical to ensure ongoing adherence to current social distancing and handwashing behaviours to protect the population from a larger outbreak.

An ongoing COVID-19 knowledge, attitudes and practices study implemented by the Population Council Institute in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh sought to assess the extent to which study participants felt personally at risk of COVID-19 (see Box 1 for a profile of study participants).

Prominent reasons for very low risk perceptions were absence of any positive case in their neighbourhood and no history of travelling outside their neighbourhood, district, state or country.

At the same time, there were misconceptions among those who perceived to be at no/low risk. Female respondents were more likely to attribute their low risk to beliefs that they are young and healthy, god will protect them or the virus will not spread under hot weather; they also had less accurate information about symptoms and preventive behaviours.

Despite our concerns stemming from low perceived risk, so far we see very high adherence – 94-95% staying home, 70-90% washing hands/using hand sanitizer more. These are very good!!

Behavior change campaigns promoting social distancing and handwashing to prevent COVID-19 may need to incorporate information on personal risk, particularly for youth who need to understand that their behavior protects older family members as well. There is also a need to bust the myths and misconceptions about COVID-19.

More young men and women (ages 18-24) believed that they were at moderate to high risk, compared with, adult men and women (ages 25 and above)