Star Power

How celebrities affect our health behaviors and decisions

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Popular entertainers and athletes wield plenty of power as pop culture icons. But can they motivate people to stop smoking, get screened for illnesses or change other habits we've spent years cultivating? You betcha, say findings from one intriguing study published about four years ago in The British Medical Journal. More recently, the lead author of this study organized a new team to further examine the issue. The researchers now want to review evidence from different countries that evaluates the short-, medium- and long-term effects of celebrity health disclosures or advice on the awareness, attitude and behavior of individuals or groups of people.

Interestingly, results from the earlier study showed that when celebrities offered medical advice or information to the public, disclosed choices they made because of a personal health condition, discussed how they managed an illness or offered opinions about medical issues or policies, people listened to and believed what they said or imitated what they did.

"This review shows there are deeply rooted biological, psychological and social forces that make celebrity health advice influential. Our brains, psyches and societies appear to be hardwired to give celebrities influence over our health decisions," said Steven Hoffman, an associate professor of law and director of the Global Strategy Lab at the University of Ottawa and lead author of the original study.

Hoffman warned, however, that people's tendency to emulate famous personalities could be good or bad. "This can be helpful when celebrities encourage healthy behaviors, but it can be dangerous when celebrities promote something that is not backed up by science."

The results of Hoffman's first study showed that public health professionals need to better understand where people get their medical information from and what motivates them to act on this knowledge. The primary objective for this follow-up research, which is now in progress, is to distribute the findings to experts in public health and partner with them to better work with celebrities to promote positive messages and interventions while minimizing negative effects on health.

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