

Study: How to judge personal health risks

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Researchers say people can pretty well judge personal health risks if they don't rely on media reports and stick to what's happened to people they know.

Psychologist Ralph Hertwig of the University of Basel in Switzerland said his team's findings challenge the assumption people make huge blunders when inferring the likelihood of such events as dying of a heart attack or in a car accident.

"People can arrive at relatively accurate estimates as long as they rely on their personal experiences of the frequencies of such events ... by thinking of how many of their relatives, friends and acquaintances died from these causes.

"However, when they start sampling from the virtual world as created by the mass media, they are more likely to arrive at distorted estimates of likelihood."

For example, he said people might erroneously conclude the death toll due to airplane crashes is greater than due to more typical causes such as asthma.

The study appears in the current issue of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, which is published by the Washington-based American Psychological Association.

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