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# **Mental Models of Illness in the COVID-19 Era**

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic and its profound global effects may be changing the way we think about illness. We surveyed 120 American adults to explore the effects of the pandemic on their mental models of illness. Participants read three vignettes: one relating to COVID-19, one to cancer, and another to the common cold, and were asked questions relating to the diagnosis, treatment, prevention, time-course, and transmission of each disease. Results showed that participants were more likely to correctly diagnose COVID-19 (93% accuracy) compared to a cold (60% accuracy) or cancer (51% accuracy). Of the 40 participants that incorrectly diagnosed the cold vignette, 7 misdiagnosed a cold as COVID-19. These and other preliminary findings suggest a distinct mental model for COVID-19 compared to other illnesses. The prevalence of COVID-19 in everyday discourse may lead to biased responding, similar to errors in medical diagnosis that result from physicians' expertise (Hashem et al., 2003).