A Community Toolkit for Addressing Health Misinformation

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General

2021
What’s in This Toolkit?

First, we’ll learn about...

1. What Is Health Misinformation?

2. Why Is It So Tempting to Share Health Misinformation?
What’s in This Toolkit?

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... then we’ll **apply** what we’ve learned.
What Is Health Misinformation?
1. What is Health Misinformation?

**Misinformation**
Information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading according to the best available evidence at the time.
Health misinformation is often posted on the internet or shared via text messages or emails.
1. What is Health Misinformation?

Health misinformation can also come in

- Speeches
- Pamphlets or posters
- News outlets
- Advertisements
1. What is Health Misinformation?

Mostly shared by people

- who do not know the claims are false or misleading
- because they want to help others
1. What is Health Misinformation?

Many people who share misinformation may be:

- Raising a concern
- Making sense of conflicting information
- Seeking answers to honest questions
1. What is Health Misinformation?

All of us are vulnerable, and all of us can help.
"Misinformation" can sometimes be spread intentionally to serve a malicious purpose, such as to trick people into believing something for financial gain or political advantage. This is usually called "disinformation." But many people who share misinformation aren’t trying to misinform. Instead, they may be raising a concern, making sense of conflicting information, or seeking answers to honest questions."
What types of health misinformation exist? Go online and see if you can find any of these common types of health misinformation.
Find These 7 Common Types of Health Misinformation.

**Memes** (fun, colorful images or graphics) that were created as a joke, but people started re-sharing thinking it was true.
Websites that look professional (often designed to look like news sites) but the stories are all false or misleading. They have sensational headlines designed to make us click on them.
Quotations where the beginning or end have been deleted to change the meaning. The person did say that, but without the full context it’s not a fair representation of what they said.
Old images that recirculate as if they are actually very recent.
Find These 7 Common Types of Health Misinformation.

Misleading graphs or diagrams that look official but don’t tell the whole story.
Cherry-picked statistics. Too often we see people choosing the number that supports what they want to argue, but without all the data, they haven’t provided all the context.
Find These 7 Common Types of Health Misinformation.

Videos that have been edited to change the meaning.

As you can see, a lot of misinformation isn’t completely false or ‘fake’, it’s actually information or imagery that lacks context. Something that has a ‘kernel of truth’ to it is much more believable.
Can you think of an example of health misinformation you’ve seen recently? Where did you see or hear it? Who shared it with you? Did it fit into any of the 7 categories we’ve described?
Why Is It So Tempting to Share Health Misinformation?
2. Why Is It So Tempting to Share Health Misinformation?

1. We like to feel that we have new information that others don’t know.

The doctors are hiding important information about the virus! Listen to what this one nurse has to say about it...
2. Why Is It So Tempting to Share Health Misinformation?

2. We want to protect the people we care about. Often when people are asked about their online sharing habits they will say things like:

I admit it. Sometimes I share things I see without checking first, but honestly, I feel that it’s better to be safe than sorry.
3. We may be seeking explanations or wanting to share information that helps us make sense of events.

Have you seen this video? I don’t know who made it, but everything seems to make sense now!
4. We want to feel connected to others.

Hey there Parker, Claire, Hanna, Kyla, Jacob, Ann! How’s everyone?
Can you think of another example of harmful misinformation you’ve seen? If you can’t think of anything, maybe scroll through your social media feeds and see what is being shared with you today. Is there anything you’re not sure about?
Understand Why People Create or Share Harmful Information. Which of these examples have you seen in your community?
Note from the Surgeon General

Sometimes, we may not be able to fully understand why someone shares or creates harmful information. Their intentions can be mixed, unclear, and even change over time — they might not fit nicely into these categories. Because of this, rather than quickly jumping to conclusions or calling them out, try to listen first and engage in an open conversation.
Understand Why People Create or Share Harmful Information.

“I deliberately create harmful disinformation.”

“I create false or misleading information to see if I can fool people for the fun of it.”

“I create hoaxes to fool people, sometimes to make money.”
Understand Why People Create or Share Harmful Information.

“Enthusiast”

I post misinformation frequently in support of a person or cause.

“Believer”

I am deeply connected to an online community that is pushing false, misleading claims. I believe the information being shared by the community is true and I want to share with others.
When I see something online that seems helpful or worrying I like to share without checking because I’d rather people have as much information as possible.

I tend to spend a lot of time online, and can sometimes share carelessly while waiting in line, or scrolling late night in bed.
5-min Activity
Understand Why People Create or Share Harmful Information.

Which of these examples have you seen in your community?
What Would You Do?

Your family member is diagnosed with a serious illness. Find out how your loved ones can be misinformed and how you can help.
I'm really sorry to let you know that your result came back positive. We'll closely monitor your condition.

But...
2

I'm so scared. What should I do?

Hmm, I think my neighbor got better after taking Supplement XYZ. Maybe try looking that up?

The nephew who knows a lot about health.
Practice 1  What Would You Do?

Pause and Ask:
Who do you go to for health information and why?
Practice 1

What Would You Do?
Pause and Ask: How do you verify which websites are trustworthy?
Practice 1

What Would You Do?

I don't even know where to start!

My neighbor mentioned “Dr. Conway.” I’m not sure but maybe it’s something?
Practice 1  What Would You Do?

Search Whizzer

... XYZ, Dr. Conway

333 results

Official Dr Conway
Why Big Pharma is lying to you..
Current Offer. Endorsed by Dr Conway
Pause and Ask:
What are some red flags you have seen about health information online?
I know we’re all scared, but I’m already starting to find some useful information online. I think there might be some hope. Look at this video of Dr. Conway. He seems to know what he’s talking about.
Practice 1

What Would You Do?
Pause and Ask:
How do you check if someone is a legitimate health provider?
Welcome to our new members. We are here for YOU.

I'm Bob. I nearly died but XYZ saved me.
I’ve found a site that ships Supplement XYZ overnight. I’m going to buy it.

Mom, I read some things online that say Supplement XYZ can be really dangerous. It hasn’t been tested for people with your condition.
Practice 1
What Would You Do?

Pause and Ask:
Does this remind you of a conversation you’ve had?
Pause and Ask:
How would you talk to your loved one about their concerns? How might you encourage them to seek professional advice before seeking treatment?
1. What is the motivation for Dr. Conway?
2. Who is he targeting?
3. Why are people susceptible?
4. What are some of the tactics used by Dr. Conway?
5. Why do people start believing it?
How to Talk About Health Misinformation With Your Family, Friends and Community
Practice 2
How to Talk About Health Misinformation With Your Family, Friends and Community

1. Listen

- Listen to their fears and beliefs
- Focus on the wider issue and how they feel
- Remember that ‘fact-check’ can often shut down a conversation
TRY THIS:
Imagine your friend is worried about potential side effects from a flu shot. How might you talk to her about her fears?
2. Empathize

- Emphasize the fact that you understand why people find it difficult to trust
- Ask questions to understand
- Admit that you have struggled
- Talk about times where you have fallen for misinformation
TRY THIS:

Imagine your uncle has just been diagnosed with a serious illness and is convinced that an obscure cure being sold online will help him. How could you talk to him about the potential harm that he could be causing?
3. Point to Credible Sources

- Underscore that finding accurate information can be hard
- Emphasize the need to find credible sources
- Remind them that an expert on one topic might not be the best in another topic
TRY THIS:
Imagine your neighbor seems to have started following conspiracy communities online and is beginning to believe increasingly outlandish claims. How might you talk to them about this?
Practice 2: How to Talk About Health Misinformation With Your Family, Friends and Community

4. Don’t Publicly Shame

- Try to have conversations one on one
- Having conversations in the comments under a post has the potential to backfire
- Be gentle in your replies; be empathetic
TRY THIS:

Imagine an old friend from your friend group from high school is sharing misinformation about a new diet. What might you do?
5. Use Inclusive Language

- Use language that makes it clear that you see yourself being impacted
- Show how you sometimes struggle
TRY THIS:

Imagine you’re talking to someone you often see at your local community center. They are worried about getting their new baby vaccinated. How would you talk to them about their fears?
Have you tried to talk about health misinformation with someone you know? How did it go? What could you have done differently? Think about ways you might approach a conversation based on these techniques. How do you think it might go, remembering you can rarely change people’s minds quickly?
Learn These Common Disinformation Tactics.

Go online and see if you can find any of these common disinformation tactics. Discuss why they are effective.
Note from the Surgeon General

We normally rely on these kinds of mental cues to quickly make sense of the world. But those who are trying to mislead us use these same cues to fool us. It’s a really good idea to learn these tactics, so you can spot them and protect yourself and those you care about.
Practice 3

Learn These Common Disinformation Tactics.

Including the logo of an established organization
Using visual cues like someone wearing a white coat or holding a stethoscope
Creating a professional, slick looking website
Including in a post: “My brother works for the government and has inside knowledge. He just told me that...”
Practice 3

Learn These Common Disinformation Tactics.

Using unique or rare terms
Creating content that looks like a first person experience
If You’re Not Sure, Don’t Share!

Misinformation can often be hard to detect. Try to identify the common types of misinformation below. What might you consider before sharing with others?
EXAMPLE A

A stark decline in flu vaccine uptake in University students over three months.
This is a graph that misrepresents the data.
EXAMPLE B

Are they crazy?
A maskless crowd spotted at a music festival last weekend
If You’re Not Sure, Don’t Share!

This is an old image that is recirculating as if it’s current.
EXAMPLE C

Health News Now: The most cutting edge health news in the country

8 herbal recipes to cure skin ailments

Boost your natural immunity with this easy trick

How to lose 30lbs in a week
This is a website that looks professional but the stories are all false or misleading.
Note from the Surgeon General

Now that you’ve seen these common types of misinformation, would you do any of the following before sharing? What else might you do?

*Remember — if you’re not sure, don’t share!*
Health Misinformation Checklist

Did you check with the CDC or local public health department to see whether there is any information about the claim being made?
Health Misinformation Checklist

Did you ask a credible health care professional such as your doctor or nurse if they have any additional information?
Health Misinformation Checklist

Did you type the claim into a search engine to see if it has been verified by a credible source?
Health Misinformation Checklist

Did you look at the “About Us” page on the website to see if you can trust the source?
Health Misinformation Checklist

If you’re not sure, don’t share!
We all have the power to shape our information environment, but we must use that power together. Only then will we be able to work toward a better information environment — one that empowers us to build a healthier, kinder, and more connected world.

By putting these lessons into practice, we can understand, identify, and stop misinformation!
Access the toolkit(pdf), infographics, and other social media graphics that you can easily share with your community at SurgeonGeneral.gov/HealthMisinformation