

# Social media alternative facts on food allergies can negatively impact medical decisions

November 8 2019

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The social media stream on food allergies is never-ending. Your Facebook and Twitter friends seem to know what they're talking about. And why shouldn't you believe all those news articles—even if you've never heard of some of the sources? Is there any harm in listening to what they have to say? Yes, according to a presentation at the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (ACAAI) Annual Scientific Meeting in Houston.

"Social media has some benefits and there is a lot of good information out there," says allergist David Stukus, MD, chair of the ACAAI Annual Meeting Program Committee and session presenter. "But [social media](#) gives everyone an equal voice—even those who are not giving out correct information. The years of training and clinical experience allergists have is given the same weight as unqualified individuals performing their own 'research' using online search engines."

Dr. Stukus says it's not surprising people search online for [health information](#), but that there is a lot of alternative facts, both deliberate and not. "This misinformation has a [negative impact](#) on medical decisions made by people with food allergies," says Dr. Stukus. "For example, you can easily find online promises of 'food [allergy](#) cures' even though none exist. These treatments look very appealing, but they haven't been properly tested and people have no way of knowing whether they're good or bad. The same is true for at-home food

sensitivity testing. People spend hundreds of dollars to be sent a long list of foods they are reportedly 'sensitive' to, and they're told to avoid the foods. But the results are meaningless."

Dr. Stukus recommends people bring online information to their appointments to discuss with their allergist. "I'd much rather someone with a food allergy bring me information so we can discuss it rather than starting a treatment without asking my opinion." Dr. Stukus advises that patients ask for time to go over questions. Anyone with a food allergy might also want to ask their allergist for recommendations on reputable and trustworthy sources on [food](#) allergies.

"There are common tactics used by people selling products or services that everyone should be aware of when they search online," says Dr. Stukus. "Be suspicious of information falsely claiming to be scientific, as well as cherry picked data, personal anecdotes and paid celebrity endorsements. Echo chambers, where you only hear opinions that echo your own, should also be avoided. If it sounds too good to be true, it likely is a myth, regardless of how many likes, shares or retweets it has."

**More information:** Presentation Title: Social Media, Advocacy and the Rise of Myths and Alternative Facts in Food Allergy

Provided by American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology

Citation: Social media alternative facts on food allergies can negatively impact medical decisions (2019, November 8) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-11-social-media-alternative-facts-food.html>

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