

Facebook posts help facilitate belief that HPV vaccine is dangerous to health

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Social media has a history of being a popular place for sexual health discussions, and the HPV vaccine is one of the most discussed vaccines on the internet.
Credit: University of Missouri

The human papillomavirus infection, or HPV, is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. HPV is associated with health problems including genital warts and cancers, but a vaccine has been available

since 2006 to help stop the virus. The CDC reports more than 12 years of data supports the HPV vaccine is safe and effective, yet HPV vaccination rates across the U.S. still remain low.

Social [media](#) has a history of being a popular place for sexual health discussions, and the HPV vaccine is one of the most discussed vaccines on the internet. Monique Luisi, an assistant professor in the University of Missouri School of Journalism, has studied more than 6,500 public HPV vaccine-related posts on Facebook from 2006 to 2016. In a [previous study](#), Luisi used these Facebook posts to identify a negative trend on Facebook related to how people perceive the HPV vaccine.

Now, she suggests this negative trend on Facebook may also cause people to develop a false perception of the health risk of the vaccine. After looking at the percentage of posts that made the vaccine seem more dangerous, less dangerous or neither, Luisi found nearly 40% of Facebook posts about the HPV vaccine amplified a perceived risk, and the data suggests these posts had momentum over time.

"We should not assume that only the disease is perceived as a risk, but when research supports it, that medical treatments and interventions might unfortunately also be perceived as risks," she said. "It's more likely that people are going to see things on social media, particularly on Facebook, that are not only negative about the HPV vaccine, but will also suggest the HPV vaccine could be harmful. It amplifies the fear that people may have about the vaccine, and we see that posts that amplify fear are more likely to trend than those that don't."

Luisi suggests the spread of this negative information may lead people to have a false perception of the vaccine, so people should consult their doctor or health care provider before making an [informed decision](#).

"Facebook remains a very popular social media platform for adult

audiences, which necessitates action to address HPV vaccine risk messages," she said. "People are going to see what they are going to see on social media, so it's important to not only take what you see on social media, but also talk to a doctor or health care provider. Just because it's trending doesn't mean it's true."

Luisi notes research must continue to address the perception of vaccine safety where the vaccine is perceived as a greater [health](#) threat than the virus or disease it prevents, and her study could also inform officials for the ongoing COVID-19 vaccine roll out and distribution.

"As the COVID-19 vaccine is being rolled out, people are likely going to see a lot of negative information, and that negative information will be what trends on [social media](#)," she said. "But, if the public can anticipate this negative information, it will be interesting to see if that will that make them less sensitive to the perceived risk of the [vaccine](#)."

More information: Monique L.R. Luisi, From bad to worse II: Risk amplification of the HPV vaccine on Facebook, *Vaccine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.vaccine.2020.11.065](#)

Provided by University of Missouri

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