

Parents of pediatric cancer patients more likely to endorse COVID-19 misinformation

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A new study led by VCU Massey Cancer Center researcher Jeanine Guidry, Ph.D., found that parents of children with cancer were more likely to believe misinformation and unverifiable content associated with

COVID-19 than parents of children with no cancer history.

"These findings help us better understand the spread and threat of COVID-19 [misinformation](#)," said Guidry, who is a member of the Cancer Prevention and Control research program at Massey Cancer Center, assistant professor in the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture in the College of Humanities and Sciences and director of the Media+Health Lab at VCU. "Misinformation can have devastating effects on people's perception of the disease and on decisions they make related to prevention and treatment. Understanding who is at greater risk for endorsing COVID-19 misinformation may help us better mitigate this issue."

Previous research shows that information about the pandemic is circulating online at [high rates](#) and not all of it is accurate. Public health officials have expressed concern about falsehoods creating an increase in nonadherence to safety guidelines among vulnerable communities.

Guidry's study, published in *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, was fueled by data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that shows pediatric [cancer](#) mortality has increased during the pandemic due to delayed access to [medical care](#), with COVID-19 misinformation cited as a potential contributing factor.

To determine whether [parents](#) of pediatric cancer patients are more susceptible to misinformation than their counterparts, Guidry's team conducted a survey among 735 parents of children ages 2 to 17—315 of them had children currently undergoing cancer treatment and 420 of them had children with no cancer history. The parents evaluated a series of COVID-19 misinformation statements taken from the World Health Organization website.

Results of the survey showed that parents of children with cancer were

more likely to endorse COVID-19 misinformation compared with the other parents. Susceptibility to misinformation was more likely for fathers, younger parents and parents with higher perceived stress.

"It is not completely clear why parents of [children](#) with cancer are more vulnerable to misinformation," said Guidry. "They may be at greater risk as a result of greater levels of COVID-19 related stress, resulting in more time spent looking for information online. Moreover, the increased stress levels reported by these parents could be affecting their information-processing abilities."

These results suggest that pediatric oncology providers should be aware of the potentially high endorsement of COVID-19 misinformation among parents of their patients and proactively address this issue during visits.

The findings will be used to provide direction for future research on acceptance of other forms of health misinformation among medically [vulnerable populations](#).

"The evolving nature of our understanding of COVID-19 necessitates coordinated and diligent efforts to reduce illness and death," said Guidry. "Paramount among these efforts is the development of innovative preventive interventions to combat COVID-19-related misinformation."

More information: Jeanine P.D. Guidry et al, COVID-19–Related Misinformation among Parents of Patients with Pediatric Cancer, *Emerging Infectious Diseases* (2021). [DOI: 10.3201/eid2702.203285](https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2702.203285)

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