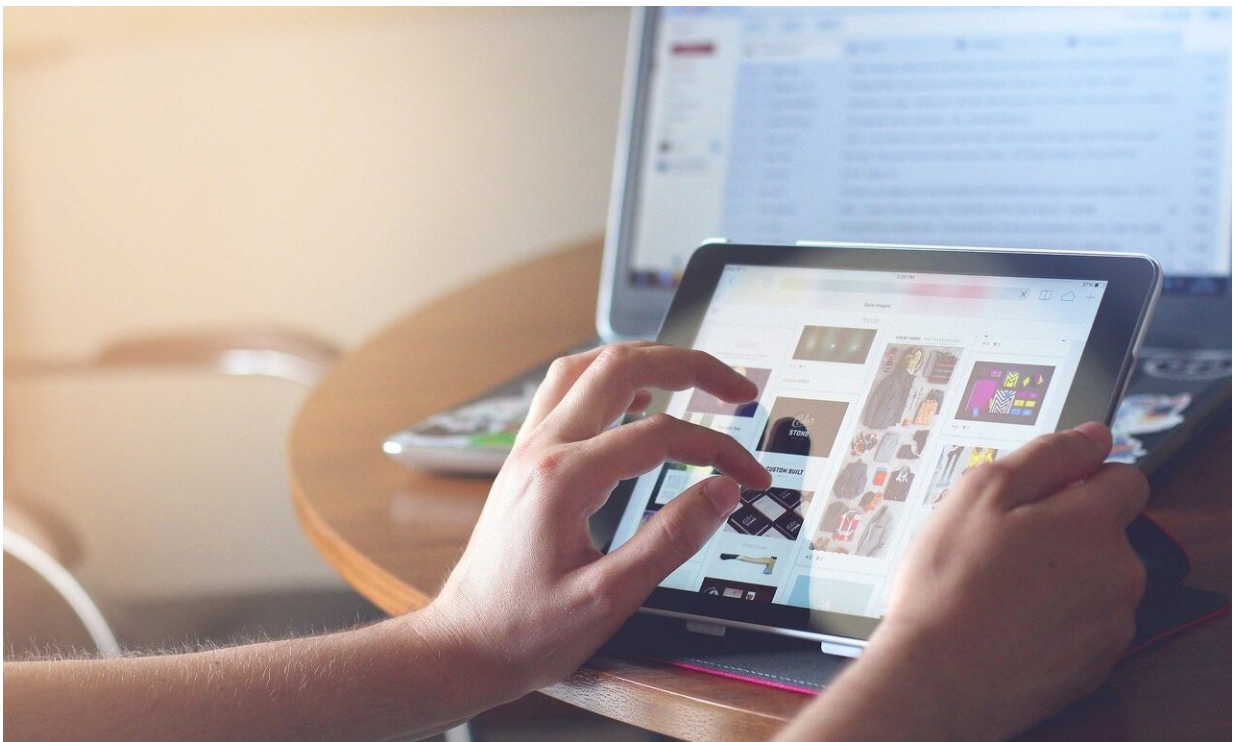


Conflicting health information compromises patients' attention and health decisions

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The 24-hour news cycle and social media bombardment often resulting in conflicting messages about health issues might be making it harder than ever for people to make critical decisions, according to a Rutgers-led study.

The study, published in *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, examined how contradictory [health information](#) impacts responses to new information and feelings toward the recommendations and experts providing them.

"People are regularly expected to interpret complex health recommendations, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic," said lead author Patrick Barnwell, a graduate student at Rutgers-New Brunswick. "Conflicting health-related recommendations are increasingly common due to the speed at which 24-hour news cycles and social media can spread information."

According to the study, conflicting information can be two or more statements about a health-related issue inconsistent with one another, from several sources like an expert or non-expert and shared in various ways like in-person or on the internet.

The researchers conducted an online study where one group read a conflicting article about the benefits of eating whole-grain foods while the other group read an article with consistent information on the same topic. The participants then performed a computerized task to measure their attention and reported the effort it took to complete.

Those who read the article with conflicting information were more confused, made more errors on the attention task, responded slower and had more negative feelings about what they read. They also said it took them more effort to complete the questions than those who read the article with no conflicting messaging, even though they did not perform as well on the task.

Researchers say these reactions may undermine the effectiveness of and satisfaction with public health and disease management. Ultimately, patients may have difficulty making and implementing appropriate health-related decisions, and those decisions may be uninformed or

misinformed.

Researchers suggest [health professionals](#) make sure messaging is consistent so that patients focus on the information and their specific decisions, rather than exerting attention to decipher the ambiguity in information.

"Consistent messaging is particularly important now given the amount of information [public health](#) officials are disseminating on vaccination," said Richard Contrada, a professor of psychology and director of the Rutgers Social, Health and Interdisciplinary Psychophysiology Lab. "Since we regularly read an abundance of conflicting information, it may be valuable for educational programs or webinars to integrate strategies people can utilize to help understand and potentially resolve discrepancies contained in health-related messaging."

More information: Patrick V. Barnwell et al, Healthy or not? The impact of conflicting health-related information on attentional resources, *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s10865-021-00256-4](#)

Provided by Rutgers University

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