

People suffering from depression susceptible to vaccine-related misinformation

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People who feel depressed are more likely to believe vaccine-related misinformation, according to a new study coauthored by a Rutgers researcher during a time when depression rates are higher due to the

COVID-19 pandemic.

The study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Network Open*, found that [people](#) with moderate or greater symptoms of depression (such as little interest in doing things, trouble sleeping or concentrating, poor appetite or overeating, and feeling bad about yourself) were more likely to believe at least 1 of 4 [false statements](#) about COVID-19 vaccines. Those who believed the statements to be true were half as likely to be vaccinated.

According to National Center for Health Statistics, approximately one-quarter of adults in the U.S. have consistently reported moderate or greater [depressive symptoms](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest people suffering from depression may be at a higher risk of COVID-19, highlighting the need to address mental health disorders.

According to the data, 29.3 percent of people with moderate or more depressive symptoms supported this misinformation, compared with 15.1 percent of those without.

While the researchers did not examine why, the link may be driven by a negativity bias, which causes people suffering from depression to focus more on content that evokes negative emotions.

"It's clear the pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the mental health of Americans, especially young people," said coauthor Katherine Ognyanova, an associate professor of communication at Rutgers' School of Communication and Information. "Now more than ever, we must watch for depressive symptoms among our communities, but platforms and the media also have a major role to play to avoid undesirable health outcomes."

The study authors used data from the research group The COVID States Project, which conducted surveys approximately once every six weeks since April 2020. The researchers analyzed data from 15,464 adults in the U.S. Participants were asked to rate vaccine-related misinformation as accurate (statement is true), inaccurate (statement is not true) or not sure. The four statements of misinformation included "The COVID-19 vaccines will alter people's DNA," "The COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips that could track people," "The COVID-19 vaccines contain the lung tissue of aborted fetuses," and "The COVID-19 vaccines can cause infertility, making it more difficult to get pregnant."

Survey participants completed a health questionnaire to measure major depressive symptoms over two weeks. Additional survey items asked respondents whether they used particular social media platforms and whether they had used any of a list of news sources (including MSNBC, Fox News, CNN, Newsmax, Facebook and the Biden administration) as sources of COVID-19–related news over the previous 24 hours.

The authors used [survey data](#) captured between April 1 and May 3, 2021, and between June 9 and July 7, 2021. The surveys were administered before the U.S. Food and Drug Administration gave its full approval for the vaccine; since December 2020, the [vaccine](#) had been available due to an Emergency Use Authorization provide by the FDA.

More information: Roy H. Perlis et al, Association of Major Depressive Symptoms With Endorsement of COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation Among US Adults, *JAMA Netw Open* (2022). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.45697](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.45697)

Provided by Rutgers University

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