

5 questions to ask before sharing health stories on social media

October 16 2022, by Thor Christensen, American Heart Association News



When it comes to posting health information on social media, beware before you share.

Experts say that's an essential step in battling medical [misinformation](#), an escalating problem as more people turn to social media for news, knowledge and advice about all things health-related.

In the wake of rampant false information about COVID-19, the U.S. surgeon general's office released an advisory last year titled "Confronting Health Misinformation." The 22-page report singled out social media for rewarding "engagement rather than accuracy" and quoted one study that found false news stories were 70% more likely to be shared on social media than true stories.

The pandemic has lessened in recent months, but health experts say medical misinformation on social media isn't likely to vanish anytime soon.

To help battle inaccurate info, here are five questions to ask before you share a health story.

Is the source trustworthy?

In the internet age, it's important to do your homework to verify whether an original source is trustworthy. But that's trickier than ever in a web filled with unreliable but official-looking sites.

Lisa Fazio, who studies misinformation, said it's best to check a source through "lateral reading," or getting off the site and doing some research to see what other authoritative sources have said about it.

"Open up a new window and find out what other people are saying about the source," said Fazio, an associate professor of psychology and human

development at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

Dr. Joseph Hill, who co-wrote a 2019 editorial in *Circulation* about combating medical misinformation, urged social media users to "vet the message" before spreading it. He recommended checking trusted medical sources such as the Mayo Clinic or American Heart Association and government sites such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration.

Is it a personal story?

Fazio said social media users have a natural tendency to "cherry pick" personal medical stories that don't reflect the big picture.

"Be wary of anecdotes," she said. "Personal stories are really powerful and persuasive, but they're often one-off events that don't tell you how common something is at a population level."

Also be leery of "people who are promoting their own commercial ventures and have a venal motive," said Hill, a cardiologist and professor at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. "It's reprehensible, but it happens all the time."

Does it make me emotional?

The surgeon general's advisory warned against sharing "emotionally charged information, enabling it to spread quickly and go viral."

"That might mean excitement or disgust or any sort of strong emotion," Fazio said. "Things that make you feel a strong emotion are often things that aren't fully true. It's a signal to think and check the facts."

Do I really need to post it right away?

Strong emotions can trigger a sense of urgency. When that happens, experts say it's best to pause, take a deep breath and wait a few hours before sharing.

"Waiting even five seconds might help," Fazio said. "Take the time to think about why you're posting. Is it to gain followers? Is it to just entertain people?"

In general, Hill said that instead of instantly clicking the "share" button, it's best "to pause and corroborate what you just read. It takes time, but it's a necessary step." Corroboration might involve looking for published peer-reviewed research that backs it up, or checking if many credible media outlets are reporting the same information.

Might I actually be harming someone?

While social media can feel like a fun, innocuous pastime among friends, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said in last year's advisory that sharing medical misinformation "can cause confusion, sow mistrust, harm people's health, and undermine public health efforts."

"The way [social media](#) algorithms work, decisions you make can affect a lot of people on the platform, not just a few," Fazio said. "Before we share something, we want to think, 'Am I improving the experience for everyone?'"

Hill was more blunt. "Medical misinformation costs lives," he said. "It's available so freely and rapidly now that it has become a new challenge for our species. If we ignore it, we ignore it at our own peril."

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Citation: 5 questions to ask before sharing health stories on social media (2022, October 16)

retrieved 26 March 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-10-health-stories-social-media.html>

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