

Education level, social media skills linked to cancer fatalism

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More educated people who are skilled at finding reliable information through social media don't always see cancer as fatal while those with less schooling and social media awareness hold more fatalistic beliefs about the disease, researchers at UT Southwestern Medical Center found. Their study, published in [*Cancer Causes & Control*](#), could help enhance public health efforts to increase cancer screening and

prevention.

People with a fatalistic view of cancer, meaning they believe it is unavoidable, are less likely to be screened and may not notice symptoms until it is too late to treat the disease adequately.

"Our study emphasizes the importance of improving [social media](#) users' ability to evaluate online [health information](#), especially for those with lower education levels, to reduce negative attitudes toward cancer prevention and treatment," said Jim Stimpson, Ph.D., Professor in the Peter O'Donnell Jr. School of Public Health and a member of the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center at UT Southwestern.

UTSW researchers examined data from the Health Information National Trends Survey to assess adults' knowledge of cancer risk factors, attitudes toward [cancer screening](#), and prevention and screening behaviors. Only adult respondents who had used social media within the previous year and completed the survey between March and November 2022 were included for analysis.

The survey measured cancer fatalism by asking participants if they believe everything causes cancer, if they think there's nothing they can do to prevent it, and if there are too many recommendations about cancer prevention.

Researchers measured social media awareness by asking participants about the difficulty in judging the truthfulness of health information. Participants were recognized as having high social media awareness if they agreed that they could tell whether health information was true or false. Researchers also examined how participants' views related to their [education level](#).

Dr. Stimpson and his colleagues found that people with at least a college

education and high media awareness were less likely to hold fatalistic views about cancer. In contrast, higher percentages of those without a [college degree](#) and with low media awareness held fatalistic beliefs.

Participants who struggled to evaluate health information on social media were 9% more likely to believe that everything causes cancer, 6% more likely to think they cannot lower their chances of getting cancer, and 21% more likely to feel overwhelmed by the number of cancer prevention recommendations.

Sixty percent of the group with a [college education](#) and high awareness of social media information accuracy agreed that "everything causes cancer," compared with 74% among those with lower education and media awareness. Additionally, the educated and media-aware group was less likely to agree that there's nothing one can do to lower the chances of developing cancer and that there are too many cancer prevention recommendations.

Enhancing the ability of social media users to judge the reliability of online health information could decrease fatalistic views about [cancer prevention](#) and treatment, the study authors said.

"We should invest in digital media literacy for patients to help them better understand quality and fact-based information available online and in social media," Dr. Stimpson added.

Public health efforts could also help educate people about the spread of [health](#) misinformation and disinformation on social media, focusing particularly on populations with low social media [awareness](#) and education levels.

More information: Jim P. Stimpson et al, Cancer fatalism, social media informational awareness, and education, *Cancer Causes & Control*

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