



Research Points: Health Misinformation

Welcome to the *We Are Allies Research Points*. Here you will find research-based information about gender-affirming care and transgender, Two-Spirit, and nonbinary (TTNB) youth. These resources were developed to support the *We Are Allies project*.

In 2023, a team of researchers conducted an environmental scan to identify misinformation messages being shared online related to gender-affirming care for TTNB youth. The team reviewed published research to systematically gather accurate information that addresses common misinformation messages. These have been organized by topic and can be found in this series of Research Points. References are provided for people who would like to learn more.

If you have questions about accessing gender-affirming healthcare for yourself or a loved one, we encourage you to reach out to a trusted healthcare provider or organization.

Introduction to Health Misinformation

People need accurate health information to make informed decisions about their health and healthcare. Health misinformation refers to information about health or healthcare that is false or misleading.¹ Sharing health misinformation accidentally or intentionally can cause harm.¹ Health misinformation campaigns targeting gender-affirming care are increasingly being spread online.² Many of these campaigns are focused on care for transgender, Two-Spirit, and non binary youth.²

Research about Health Misinformation

The next section summarizes research describing ways in which health misinformation spreads online. Research-based guidelines are presented for evaluating health information messages and addressing health misinformation.

Health misinformation spreads online

Misinformation is an umbrella term for information that is false or misleading.

Misinformation is sometimes shared by people who do not know it is false.¹ Some false messages, called disinformation, are intentionally spread to cause harm.¹



Misinformation messages are designed to be believable. Some messages are simply made up of false information.¹ While the information is untrue, it is shared in a way that makes it seem believable.² Messages that are designed to bring up strong emotions, such as fear, may be more believable.^{3,4} Other misinformation messages start with accurate information, which is changed in some way. For example:

- Redaction involves removing some of content from an accurate message, resulting in a message that is untrue.²
- Airbrushing is when part of an accurate message is replaced with false information.²
- False context describes true information that is shared out of context, making the new message inaccurate.⁵

Misinformation can spread quickly online through repetition and information overload. Once believable misinformation messages are created, they often spread quickly online.⁶⁻⁸ Repetition is one way misinformation spreads online.¹ When a message is repeated by many different sources, people are more likely to believe it is true.¹ When there is a very large amount of misinformation on a topic, it can be hard for people to tell it apart from accurate information.¹ This is called information overload.¹

Evaluating health information messages

It is important to evaluate health information messages, because misinformation about health and healthcare can cause harm. People need accurate information to make informed decisions about health and healthcare.⁹ Health policies and laws must be based on accurate information in order to support well-being.¹⁰ Health misinformation can easily spread online, through email, social media, and websites.⁸ Once we identify health misinformation, we can do something about it.

When you are not sure if you should trust a health information message, take two minutes to check it out. No checklist will tell you if a message is true or false, but you can look for signs of trustworthy or questionable health information messages. See our *Check it Out* tool. Remember to check the source, check the message, and check to see what others are sharing on the topic.

Only share online health information if you're sure it's trustworthy. If it's questionable, don't share it. If it is important to share information on the topic, look for a trustworthy message instead. Trusted sources typically include government and university health websites, nonprofit health organizations, and materials authored by true experts (for example, those with medical credentials related to the health information).

Addressing health misinformation

Addressing misinformation can prevent harm. It is important to address health misinformation for several reasons. Providing accurate information supports better healthcare decisions, policies, and laws.⁹ Just like misinformation, accurate information can reach many people online.

There are strategies we can use to address online health misinformation. Here are five strategies anyone can use:

- Share facts from trustworthy sources and note scientific consensus.^{11,12}
- Highlight gaps by bringing attention to parts of the message that do not make sense.^{12,13}
- Cross-check by sharing effective strategies for checking health information messages.¹⁴
- Protect against health misinformation by proactively making people aware of health misinformation messages and sharing accurate health information.¹⁵
- Be accountable for misinformation you share: apologize, acknowledge harm, share facts, and demonstrate strategies for evaluating health information messages.¹⁶

It is important that we support each other in addressing online health

misinformation. Anyone can make a mistake and share health misinformation. It is important that we support each other as we build the skills to evaluate and address misinformation. Health misinformation can cause harm in many ways. For people who are members of communities targeted by misinformation, addressing it can be challenging.¹⁷ Not only can the process of addressing misinformation be stressful,¹⁷ it can sometimes result in harassment. It is important to:

- Consider the safety of ourselves and our loved ones when addressing misinformation.
- Express gratitude to those who address misinformation.
- Celebrate progress made in raising awareness about health misinformation and creating health services and policies based on research.

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