

Social media and health information

Many people, especially from younger generations, regularly use social media for information and advice about health. What are the benefits and pitfalls of this practice? **Joan Garrod** investigates



Social media sites are the go-to source for information for many people on a wide variety of topics, including health. For example, a 2023 survey conducted by Dublin City University found that 57% of Gen-Z and millennial TikTok users are influenced by, or regularly adopt, trends on nutrition available on the platform. 'Fitspiration' is a popular social media hashtag with advice aimed at inspiring followers to lead healthier lifestyles.

Benefits

There is no doubt that social media posts and forums can be extremely beneficial. Reading about other people's experiences of dealing with

serious health problems such as cancer, melanoma, diabetes, long Covid and a range of mental health issues, and getting advice on how best to deal with various treatments can be beneficial. Many find strength in online support groups accessed through social media. Doctors and other healthcare professionals are also putting up posts and videos on social media covering a range of health issues to improve users' 'health literacy'.

Pitfalls

However, not all information and advice found on social media platforms is good, and some is potentially harmful. For example, the Dublin



City University study found that only 2.1% of the nutritional advice on TikTok proved to be accurate when compared to public health guidelines. A 2022 study published by the American National Center for Biotechnology Information found evidence of misinformation and potential harm in social media information on cancer treatments. Two cancer experts reviewed 50 of the most popular social media articles on each of the four most common cancers (200 articles in total). Some 32.5% of articles contained misinformation, and another 30.5% contained harmful information. Other studies assessing social media health content have shown that less than 30% is medically accurate.

Consequences

A range of individual and social harms can arise from misleading content on health issues. For example, measles is a serious childhood illness. Many social media articles and forums wrongly asserted that the MMR vaccine (which protects against measles, mumps and rubella) greatly increased the risk of a child developing autism. This resulted in many parents not having their children vaccinated, leading to a rise in measles cases. Similar misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounded Covid-19 vaccinations, resulting in some people refusing to be vaccinated, or to keep up with booster injections.

Getting the right message across?

In September 2024 the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that it was about to engage in a year-long partnership with TikTok to provide users with science-based evidence on health issues aimed to combat the high levels of misleading and potentially harmful information on social media.

Questions and activities

- 1 Look up examples of 'anti-vax' campaigns and consider what the social consequences might be.
- 2 Find two or three examples of 'celebrities' discussing their health issues on social media and note how this could be beneficial to others in the same situation. (You might start with Olympian cyclist Sir Chris Hoy and the issue of prostate cancer.)
- 3 Read and make brief notes on the sources referred to in this article (see below for links).

References

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