NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
Community Health Centers®

PUSHING BACK ON THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 VACCINE MISINFORMATION
A RESOURCE TO HELP HEALTH CENTERS TAKE ACTION
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Misinformation about COVID-19 has spread almost as fast as the virus itself. In 2021, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, M.D., M.B.A., issued an advisory about misinformation, warning that misinformation about COVID-19 is an urgent threat to public health that is putting American lives at risk. The National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) hears frequently from health centers that misinformation is one of the biggest challenges they face in responding to the pandemic.

NACHC created this resource to help you counter misinformation in your community—not only about COVID-19 but about other health issues as well.

MISINFORMATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

The sheer volume of communications about vaccines has skyrocketed. We now live in an **infodemic** age where each day people receive an overabundance of information. Only some of this information is correct and credible. The rise in the spread of inaccurate and misleading information about COVID-19 vaccines has resulted in considerable confusion and an increase in vaccine hesitancy. People are rejecting and distrusting evidenced-based public health guidance and measures such as masking and physical distancing and using unproven COVID-19 treatments.

As highly trusted sources of health information, health centers are well positioned to join national and local efforts to actively respond to COVID-19 misinformation. Health centers can help people make informed decisions about their health based on accurate, evidenced-based, and factual health information.

SOCIAL MEDIA & THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 MISINFORMATION & DISINFORMATION

The inaccurate information that is being spread about COVID-19 vaccinations takes one of two forms: misinformation or disinformation.

MISINFORMATION—false information that is shared by people who do not realize it is false and don't mean to influence others with inaccurate information

DISINFORMATION—false information that is deliberately engineered and disseminated with malicious intent

Both forms of inaccurate health information can affect vaccine confidence and vaccination rates. Most misinformation and disinformation that has circulated about COVID-19 vaccines has focused on vaccine development, safety, and effectiveness, as well as COVID-19 denialism. With many people turning to social media platforms to get their health information when and from where they want it, social media has become a significant contributor to the spread of mis/dis information. According to a study by the de Beaumont Foundation:

- 21% of Americans say that **social media is their *most influential*** source of information about COVID-19
- People whose primary source of information is social media are **16% less likely to have had at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine**
- People who get their COVID-19 information from social media are **14-22% more likely to believe common myths about COVID-19**

Information to Disinformation—Content on a Continuum

INFORMATION	RUMOR	MISINFORMATION	DISINFORMATION
Data with meaning; the basis of knowledge when it is resonant, actionable, trusted	**Unverified information;** stories/reports that spread rapidly through a group or population; can be true or false	**Accidental falsehoods;** Wrong or misleading information, with the power to dilute, distract, and/or distort	**Deliberate, engineered falsehoods**, circulated with malicious intent or for the purpose of serving a personal, political, or economic agenda

TAKING ACTION TO COMBAT MISINFORMATION

Want to counter the spread of misinformation or be ready to respond to inaccurate information posted by a patient, but not sure where to begin? Below are some steps you can take to prepare and monitor for misinformation and engage, respond, and develop content when appropriate.

Closely Monitor Your Health Center's Social Media Channels

- Watch for misinformation circulating and posted on your health center's social media channels.
- Check the Public Health Communication Collaborative misinformation alerts to stay abreast of the latest types of COVID-19 misinformation that may require a response from your health center. This helpful resource tracks common myths and provides talking points to counter them.

Learn the Common Tactics People Use to Create Disinformation

As you monitor for misinformation, you want to be able to recognize anti-COVID vaccine proponents who deliberately and maliciously post false information. By identifying these actors, you can more confidently assess the content and determine how you should respond. Disinformation tactics often used by anti-vaxxers include:

- **Cherry picking data**—choosing the statistic that supports the statement or argument a person wants to make, but without presenting all the data or all the context
- **Reference to fake experts**
- **Race baiting—**verbal attacks against a member(s) of a racial group
- **Values baiting—**verbal attacks on someone(s) values

> **IMPORTANT NOTE: When inaccurate information about COVID-19 is deliberately published, the best strategy is to avoid engaging.** You may offer a factual response correcting the misinformation, but you do not want to repeat or share false information or get caught in a back-and-forth online argument with anyone who deliberately publishes false information.

Assess the content to determine if and how you respond

While you may want to avoid responding to disinformation, you may choose to correct content that may not be intentionally inaccurate or is only partially accurate. Use this checklist when you spot a piece of health information you suspect may be misinformation.

- **Check the Source**
  - ✔ Did you type the claim into a search engine to see if it has been verified by a credible source?
  - ✔ Did you read the "About Us" page on the website or social media platform to see if it is a source you can trust?
  - ✔ Are you looking at the orginal source of content being posted on the social media channel or other digital platform?

- **Check the Data**
  - ✔ Did you check the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or local public health department website to see whether there is information about the claim being made?
  - ✔ Did you check with other health center providers to see if they have any additional information?

- **Check the Date**
  - ✔ How recent was the article or social media post originally published?
  - ✔ If it was originally published months ago, is there updated information now available?

Respond to COVID-19 vaccine misinformation by either debunking, inoculating, or reporting

DEBUNKING—Responding to misinformation such as myths or rumors that appear in social media posts allows health center staff to explain why the information is false and offer evidenced-based facts with clear, simple, and easy-to-understand language from a trusted medical source. By debunking the myth or rumor, health center staff educate the person who posted the misinformation and all the people who read and/or comment on it.

INOCULATING—Inoculating or pre-bunking is a method used to prepare someone for misinformation before they are exposed to it by giving accurate information to counter the anticipated inaccuracies. A good inoculation message provides a counterargument to explain the flaws in a piece of misinformation. This method is effective in debunking rumors, myths, and conspiracy theories because it prepares people for what they might hear or read.

REPORTING—While you want to avoid engaging with a post you identified as disinformation, you can still act. Health center staff can report posts with false information about COVID-19 and vaccines to social media platforms. To report a post, look for the menu button next to each post with a 'report' option.

Use the "Fact Sandwich Method" to Respond to Misinformation

Correcting false statements without further spreading them can be tricky, but it can be done effectively.

Public health communication experts recommend using the "Fact Sandwich" method when responding to misinformation. The response:

- leads with the truth
- warns of the misinformation
- briefly describes the false information, and
- ends by restating the truth and the facts.

The goal of using the "Fact Sandwich" is to expose people to a weakened version of the misinformation and equip them with counter-arguments (the facts). Check out these helpful "Fact Sandwich" examples CDC created to address some common misinformation about COVID-19 vaccination.

Responding to COVID-19 Misinformation Guidance

✓ DO

- Be personal and empathetic
- Listen and validate the person's concerns
- Respond with accurate and reliable sources—rely on science and data and personal experience
- Provide easy to grasp facts and stats
- Account for the varying experiences of people in different demographic groups—many communities of color have valid historical reasons to be skeptical of the health system
- Avoid stereotypes and/or negative information about racial, ethnic, religious groups, etc.
- Disengage if the person is "committed" to espousing false narratives
- Stay politically neutral

✗ DON'T

- Get political
- Repeat misinformation
- Take it personally
- Vilify the sharer or shame
- Rely on fear

The Fact Sandwich Method for Responding to Misinformation

FACT
Lead with the fact

Make it clear, relevant, memorable

WARNING
Misinformation alert!

Misleading tactics alert!

FALLACY

Unintentional
Explain reasons why facts could have been misinterpreted

Intentional
1. Flag tactics being used to deceive
2. Undermine trust in disinformation authors
3. Highlight misleading tactics
4. Reveal hidden agenda

FACT
Provide alternative correct information

Must replace misinformation

Make correct information more memorable than misinformation

(Graphic modified from UNICEF Field Guide on Addressing Misinformation)

RESPONDING TO AN ANTI-VAXX ATTACK

Common tactics used by anti-vaxxers include responding to a social media post with rapid waves of negative, harassing, or argumentative comments. These negative and aggressive posts are usually very organized and involve several different people to create a swarm of anti-vaxx comments that can overwhelm the original poster. Also, it can make them feel isolated, threatened, and even terrified so they go silent. If your health center or one of your health center staff experiences an anti-vaxx attack, here are a few actions to help reduce the negative impact:

1. Stop engaging with the attacker.
2. Assess and increase your privacy settings across all social media platforms if needed.
3. Screenshot and save negative and menacing comments along with any fraudulent reviews.
4. Report the attackers to the social media platform using the report button at the bottom of the post.
5. Block your attackers and delete negative comments.
6. Claim your health center on Yelp and Google if you have not done so already.
7. Inform your health center leadership team of the situation and how you are responding.
8. Be intentional about taking breaks to care for yourself including your mental and emotional well-being.
9. Remember you are not alone, and this will not last forever.
10. Contact the Public Goods Project at info@publicgoodsproject.org for additional guidance and support.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Pushing Back on the Digital Spread of COVID-19": NACHC-sponsored webinar featuring Joe Smyser, Ph.D., CEO of the Public Good Project (PGP). Dr. Smyser gives an overview of the current infodemic of misinformation and disinformation spreading across social media channels that contributes to vaccine hesitancy. In addition, Dr. Smyser provides guidance on deciphering and responding to misinformation and disinformation and an actual attack by anti-vaxxers.

Vaccine Misinformation Field Guide: Produced by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)'s in collaboration with the Project Goods Project (PGP), First Draft, Yale Institute for Global Health, 2020, offers in-depth guidance in understanding, monitoring, identifying, and responding to misinformation and disinformation.

A Community Toolkit for Addressing Misinformation: Published by Office of the United States Surgeon General, features a series of steps the public and organizations can take to monitor and respond to misinformation and disinformation with examples of each and practice exercises

Misinformation Alerts: Webpage on the Public Health Communications Collaborative website tracks COVID-19 misinformation and offers recommended responses

How to Address COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation: CDC's guidance and overview of responding to COVID-19 vaccine misinformation

Changing the COVID Conversation: A Communications Cheat Sheet: Produced by the de Beaumont Foundation, offers recommended words and phrases health care providers and the public can use when writing and discussing COVID-19 care and vaccination.

REFERENCES:

Pushing Back on the Digital Spread of COVID-19

Vaccine Misinformation Field Guide

A Community Toolkit for Addressing Misinformation

CDC: How to Address COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation