

As US battles COVID-19, flu shot misinfo spreads

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US health officials are pushing Americans to get vaccinated against the flu to help prevent hospitals already busy battling COVID-19 from being overwhelmed this winter, but false claims are threatening their efforts.

Misinformation on [social media](#), particularly that a [flu shot](#) will increase the risk of contracting the [coronavirus](#) or cause you to test positive for COVID-19—it won't—is undermining the public health message.

One false claim circulating on Facebook and Instagram said a flu shot would raise the probability of COVID-19 infection by 36 percent. Another on Instagram said Sanofi's [flu vaccine](#) Fluzone was 2.4 times more deadly than COVID-19.

A national study from the University of Michigan found that one in three parents planned to skip the flu vaccine for their children this year, with mothers and fathers pointing to misinformation, including the belief that it is not effective, as a reason.

"Primary care providers have a really important

role to play in this flu season," said Sarah Clark, research scientist at the Michigan Medicine Child Health Evaluation and Research Center, who led the study.

"They need to send parents a clear and strong message about the importance of flu vaccine."

But with daily COVID-19 infections rising to record levels in several US states, [false information](#) remains a barrier to people getting vaccinated.

Jeanine Guidry, an assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University who studies health messaging on social media, said: "There is so much misinformation related to COVID and I really believe that that spills over" to the flu.

Amelia Jamison, a misinformation researcher and doctoral student at Johns Hopkins University, agreed.

"Flu is getting caught up in some of the narratives we see about coronavirus," she said.

Vaccination hobbled in 2020

According to the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), only 49.2 percent of people got a flu vaccine during the 2018-19 season.

Aside from misinformation, measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 resulted in fewer in-person preventive medical visits, during which many receive the vaccine. And other flu shot clinics typically offered by employers, churches or schools have been on hold.

High unemployment due to the economic fallout of the pandemic has also left millions of Americans without health insurance, meaning states will need to pick up the vaccine cost for more patients.

While the effectiveness of the flu shot can vary

depending on whether the strain of flu circulating in communities matches the strain in the vaccine, the CDC said it prevents millions of illnesses each year.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the vaccine for all children over the age of six months.

Flu vaccine expert Danuta Skowronski, of the British Columbia Center for Disease Control, said: "We saw no association in children nor in adults between the receipt of influenza vaccine and coronavirus risk."

Social media response

While social media platforms host misinformation, they also take actions to spread reliable guidance about vaccines.

This week, Facebook announced it would start directing US users to information about where they can get a flu shot, and promised to reject ads that discourage vaccination.

Prior to the pandemic, Twitter and Pinterest put in place policies to redirect searches of certain vaccine-related keywords to public health organizations.

But Adam Dunn, head of Biomedical Informatics and Digital Health at The University of Sydney, said more can be done.

Methods developed to encourage user engagement on social media "could be used more judiciously to guide people to credible and evidence-based information," Dunn said.

He also advocated for the creation of more "communities of pro-vaccine advocacy that are welcoming, honest, and aligned with a diversity of worldviews."

Libby Richards, associate professor at the Purdue School of Nursing, said that "a flu shot is more important than ever this year," cautioning that severe cases of COVID-19 and the flu require the same life saving equipment.

"Receiving the flu vaccine will not only provide personal health protection, it will also help reduce the burden of respiratory illness on our already very overstretched healthcare system."

Richards encouraged people to take the time to fact-check information.

"There are many myths about the flu [vaccine](#) that can clearly be disproved with a little background reading," she said.

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