Identifying Credible Information About COVID-19 Vaccines

Note: While this section was written with COVID-19 vaccines in mind, many of the general principles apply to other vaccines as well. Individual vaccines may vary in their antigenic components or dosage forms, but the principles of human behavior and good communication skills transcend most differences between vaccines.

The Issue

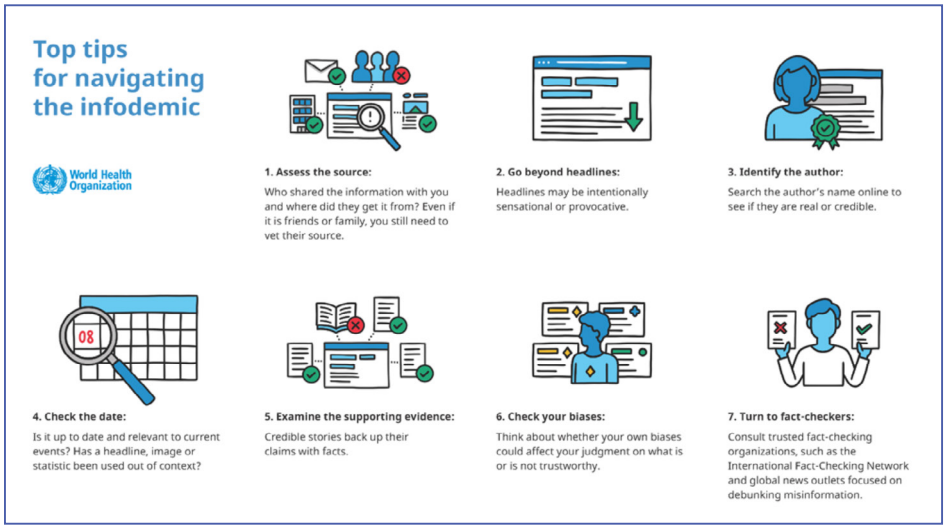
Misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic has hindered efforts to get Americans vaccinated. Learning to identify credible sources of information about COVID-19 vaccines can help people become confident in their decision to get vaccinated. It also helps them respond to misinformation shared by family, friends, or members of their community.

What We Know

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by what the World Health Organization (WHO) refers to as an "infodemic": an overabundance of information, both online and offline.[1]

Americans have been exposed to a seemingly endless stream of news, public health guidance, fact sheets, infographics, research, opinions, rumors, myths, falsehoods, and more.[2] Many people have trouble figuring out what to believe, which sources to trust, and how to keep up with changing knowledge and guidance. WHO has developed tips for navigating this infodemic (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Top Tips for Navigating the Infodemic[3]



Accurate vaccine information is an essential component of vaccine confidence. Experts recommend that providers depersonalize the questioning of someone's "facts" and instead provide evidence-based data to provide facts from reputable sources. WHO has outlined seven steps people can follow to evaluate the credibility and accuracy of COVID-19 information and decide who and what to trust.[3]

1. Assess the Source

When a person encounters a piece of information about COVID-19 vaccines, the first questions that should be asked are: who shared the information—and where did they get it?

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The information on websites that end in ".edu" (associated with an education institution) or ".gov" (belonging to a government organization) may be more reliable than information on other websites because those domains are restricted.[4,5] Websites that end in ".org" usually belong to nonprofit organizations; ".com" domains have broader ownership. WHO recommends checking the "About Us" and "Contact Us" pages on those sites to look for background information and legitimate contact details.

It may be possible to spot fake social media accounts by looking at how long a profile has been active (fake accounts likely are newer) and how many followers it has (likely fewer). The authenticity of images can be verified using reverse image search tools (e.g., the website TinEye.com or the "Search by Image" function on Google, accessed by clicking on the camera icon in the Images tab search bar). YouTube videos can be verified using the YouTube Data Viewer provided by Amnesty International.

2. Go Beyond Headlines

As WHO explains, headlines may be intentionally sensational or provocative to attract readers. Looking at the entire article can provide important context. Information on social media can be compared with information that appears in print sources such as newspapers and magazines or digital sources such as online news sites.

3. Identify the Author

Search the author's name online to see if the person is real or credible. What are the author's credentials? Is the author likely to be fair and objective? Does the author appear to have any specific motive for sharing the information—especially a profit motive? What agenda might the author be supporting?

4. Check the Date

When was the information published? During the COVID-19 pandemic, new information emerges daily; something that was true just last week may have been superseded by more recent findings. Online health information sources should display a date when the information was posted or last reviewed. Is the information recent, and does it seem up to date? Has a headline, image, or statistic been used out of context?

5. Examine the Supporting Evidence

Credible stories back up their claims with facts—for example, evidence from scientific studies or expert opinion. Ideally, a knowledgeable person with medical or research credentials reviews information before it gets posted on a website.

The information about COVID-19 vaccines on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website is researched, written, and approved by subject matter experts, including physicians, researchers, epidemiologists, and analysts. Content is based on peer-reviewed science.[6]

6. Check Your Biases

Confirmation bias is the tendency of people to look for and accept information that supports what they already believe and disregard or reject information that goes against what they believe. When people are drawn to (or dismiss) a particular headline or story, they should consider whether the information is telling them what they want to hear or challenging their assumptions.

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7. Turn to Fact-Checkers

When doubt about the credibility and accuracy of information remains, one avenue is to consult trusted fact-checking organizations. The website *FactCheck.org* routinely investigates stories related to COVID-19.[7] The website Poynter.org provides access to the searchable CoronaVirusFacts/DatosCoronaVirus Alliance database, which unites fact-checkers in more than 70 countries and includes articles published in at least 40 languages.[8] The global news outlets Associated Press and Reuters also routinely publish fact-check articles about COVID-19.

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