

How to Know If a Scary Health Headline Is Legit

Written by Debbie Koenig

5 min read

April 14, 2025 — If you heard that [Girl Scout cookies](#) are [toxic](#), that [mRNA vaccines](#) can harm you, or that immigrants are [spreading tuberculosis](#) in the U.S., maybe you should put down your phone.

You’ve been exposed to a dangerous and contagious epidemic: health misinformation. But don’t worry, there are ways to protect yourself.

Many of us have a built-in trust of the media. As Mat Stevens puts it, “If something is published, surely people have verified it — why would they lie?” Stevens is with [Health Literacy Media](#), an organization that helps health care professionals communicate in plain language.

A couple of decades ago that was surely true. But the huge growth in new media — fast, sensational, and unreliable — has changed the landscape. It’s harmless for cooking and golf tips, but not for your health.

These days health advice is everywhere you look, and a discovery often spreads moments after it’s announced. As a careful study rolls from press release to headline to Instagram post to podcast, its findings can be misinterpreted or misrepresented. If you sense that something is off, go with your skeptical gut. And don’t be surprised if you can’t tell where a sketchy claim originated — that’s a telltale sign of misinformation.

“At no point in history did we have to evaluate hundreds of stories every day,” Stevens said. “Now we’re scrolling through so much information, it’s impossible to verify everything you see.”

Scientific Research vs. 21st Century Media

The [scientific method](#) is the step-by-step way to investigate a theory, a slow process with lots of questioning and evaluation by peers. It can take decades for a theory to become accepted — and there’s always a chance that later research will change our understanding.

But this methodical approach is at odds with our fast-paced media environment, where clicks equal cash.



How Clinical Trials Work

Clinical trials test the safety and effectiveness of new treatments. What qualifies you for one, and what’s the process

“Science is about patterns, not individual studies,” said Monica Wang, ScD, an expert in health misinformation at Boston University School of Public Health. “If multiple, independent, large-scale studies indicate a risk, that’s when we should be concerned.”

For media companies to stay in business, headlines must be fast out of the gate, [eye-catching](#), and blunt, which leaves little room for nuance. Taking time to make sure what a new study really says might mean missing the news cycle.

“Whenever your employees’ livelihood depends on articles that get people to view ads, you resort to tactics like salacious headlines and overblowing the impact,” Stevens said.

Obviously, not all publications work on this model. But even the ones who want to make sure they get it right feel the pressure — if they take too long to produce a story, it might reach a much smaller audience. And by then, the “hot take” might be too widespread to overcome with reasoning.

The newest wrinkle is artificial intelligence, which is being used to create “deepfakes” that falsely show doctors endorsing products. You literally can’t be sure if what you’re seeing is real. That alone should make you question reports that shock you or seem too good to be true.

How Social Media Can Mislead You

⌵ Skip to main content fast because it’s so easy to share, with social media leading the way. More than half of American adults say they’ve used health advice from social media, a recent [survey](#) found. That’s a larger share than from any other source — even medical professionals.

influencers.

To make a living, influencers need lots of followers who are engaged — liking, commenting, or sharing a post. This can lead an influencer to exaggerate a benign health claim into a big deal. The more people see and share it, the more they’ll earn.

How mRNA Technology Works



Where You’ve Seen mRNA Technology at Work

The vaccines made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna use mRNA to fight COVID-19. When these vaccines were rolled out, it was the first time mRNA was used on humans in vaccine technology. While the concept is new to the public, the research has been around since the early 1990s.

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What are mRNA Vaccines?

mRNA is a type of molecule that has the ability to deliver instructions to your cells to make pieces of [protein](#) used could [induce](#) an immune response to fight off a viral attack.

Harnessing this technology, scientists had been experim

“Nowadays you can scroll and scroll and scroll,” Stevens said. “[Influencers] want something that can stand out from that, and what stands out isn’t going to be, ‘Scientists did a peer-reviewed look at the level of heavy metals in cookies.’ It’s going to be, ‘The Girl Scouts are poisoning your kids.’”

One recent study looked at health-related videos on TikTok and found that [almost half](#) contained incorrect or even harmful information. In another study, roughly [one-third](#) of top cancer-related posts across social media platforms included misleading or dangerous information. And last year, misleading videos on Instagram and Tiktok led to a [backlash against hormonal birth control](#) among young women.

Another reason to distrust influencers: They’re often getting paid by the makers of products they tout. A study in February looked at posts about questionable screening tests like [full-body scans](#). More than 194 million followers saw content that overwhelmingly discussed potential benefits — but not harms. Turns out [68%](#) of the influencers had a financial stake in a test they promoted. (This is in contrast with peer-reviewed studies, where researchers have to declare any possible conflict of interest.)

Red Flags for Health Misinformation

So is there one weird trick to help you detect bad info? Of course not — but there are warning signs to watch for as you’re scrolling:

- **You react emotionally.** “Extreme language like ‘toxic,’ ‘deadly,’ or ‘poison’ without clear evidence is a warning sign,” Wang said. If a claim truly scared you, it may be overblown.
- **Claims are anecdotal** rather than data-driven and peer-reviewed. Just because an influencer said something harmed them doesn’t make it risky for you.
- **It’s only one study.** Research that doesn’t relate to other research probably isn’t definitive. Check how many people participated, too. The larger the numbers, the more likely it is there’s something there.
- **You’re only seeing it on social media or an unfamiliar website.** Genuine health stories get written in multiple mainstream publications. Google is your friend here: See how many publications are reporting the news.
- **It relies on correlation, not causation.** Sometimes statistics line up, but not in a meaningful way. Think of it like this: Just because homicide rates go up [when ice cream sales spike](#) that doesn’t mean ice cream is murderous.
- **There is a sales pitch.** Anyone who spends time building up a problem, only to sell you a “cure,” can’t be trusted.

If you don’t have the time or the desire to dig into the details behind an alarming headline, just move on. Let this be your mantra: When in doubt, don’t share it.

“Misinformation spreads because it often triggers strong emotions,” Wang said. “Not every alarming headline indicates a crisis, and not every internet claim needs to be debunked aggressively.”

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