Instagram Storytelling May Help Promote HPV Vaccination

The vaccine is safe and effective against cancer-causing strains of HPV, and yet anti-vaccination misinformation campaigns have taken hold.

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Narrative-based Instagram posts may help persuade parents to allow human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination for their children, according to a recent study.

Facts alone, a new study shows, may be more inclined to fall on deaf ears, according to a new study. But combining storytelling elements with accurate, actionable information may be a winning strategy in getting more parents to vaccinate their children—and ultimately prevent more cancer.

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States. It causes not only genital warts but six different types of cancer in men and women, including 9 out of 10 cases of cervical cancer and 7 out of 10 oral cancers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The CDC recommends that all children receive the HPV vaccine when they are 11 or 12 years old. The vaccine has been firmly established as safe and effective. Nevertheless, today only about half of adolescents have been vaccinated.

HPV vaccine uptake among US adolescents aged 13–17 years, 2006–2017National Cancer Institute

Misinformation campaigns on social media platforms may be partly to blame for the low vaccination rate.

“In recent years, we’re seeing a resurgence of misleading anti-vaccination messages and related misinformation spreading through social media,” the senior author of the new study, Philip M. Massey, PhD, an associate professor of community health and prevention at Drexel University’s Dornsife School of Public Health in Philadelphia, said in a press release. “By studying what makes these messages so effective online, we can improve fact-based, pro-vaccination messaging aimed at improving public health.”

In the study, which was published in Health Education and Behavior, the researchers started with a pool of nearly 3,400 Instagram posts about HPV vaccination and randomly selected 360 for their analysis.

Fifty-six percent of the posts supported the HPV vaccine, while the remainder were opposed. In the majority of cases, the anti-vaccination posts featured a narrative structure, meaning they told a story. Seventy-two percent of the pro-vaccination posts shared information that could lead people to take action, while only 28% included some sort of story line.

The study authors theorized that this greater reliance on human narratives on the part of the anti-vaccination posts contributed to the fact that they got more than three times as many “likes” on

average compared with the pro-vaccination posts: 86 versus 24.

With more than one in three U.S. adults using Instagram, including 71% of 18- to 24-year-olds, the Drexel researchers see an opportunity for those promoting HPV vaccinations to leverage the social media platform, especially if they rely on storytelling within their posts.

To read a Cancer Health article about the recent expansion of the recommendation for the HPV vaccine to include men and women up to age 26, click here.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

To read the study, click here.

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