

# Social Media Spreads Cancer Misinformation

Despite some influencers' claims, traditional cancer treatment is consistently more effective than so-called natural remedies.

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The [internet](#) is a vast hub of information for anyone to access with a click. But when it comes to cancer, some users may fall victim to cancer [misinformation](#) being peddled by self-identified experts.

Misinformation regarding cancer isn't new, but it has spread more broadly in recent years, according to a review published in [Oncology Practice](#) last year, and social media is one of its major breeding grounds.

"Understanding how the internet has changed engagement with health information and facilitated the spread of misinformation is an important task and challenge for cancer clinicians," the authors of the review wrote.

They noted that [social media](#) users are more likely to believe information they see online if it is shared by a source they find credible. "However, there is no online verification of credentials for social media accounts, and anyone can engage in social media without providing credentials or by reporting false ones," they wrote.

A study published in the [Journal of the National Cancer Institute](#) looked at the most popular articles posted on social media in 2018 and 2019 about the four most common cancers and found that one in three posts contained false, inaccurate or misleading information.

The increasing amount of cancer misinformation on the internet, especially the promotion of unproven [treatments](#), can be harmful.

Multilevel marketer Jessie Lee Ward recently died of Stage IV colon cancer after sharing with her hundreds of thousands of online followers how she was trying to cure her cancer naturally. Ward was roundly criticized by media personalities because her treatment plan wasn't supported by scientific evidence or doctor recommendations.

Dismissing her oncologist's suggestion to use traditional treatment methods, such as

chemotherapy or radiation, Ward instead tried a hyperbaric oxygen chamber, ozone treatments, magnetic treatments and red-light therapy to treat her colon cancer, according to [The Independent](#).

Data on whether alternative therapies work are limited, but people with cancer who used alternative or complementary treatments instead of conventional cancer care had a greater risk of dying compared with people who received conventional cancer treatment, according to a study published in the [Journal of the National Cancer Institute](#).

This doesn't mean all alternative, or integrative, therapies should be discounted. For example, research has shown that acupuncture can be effective in relieving chronic cancer pain. (For a collection or related articles, [click #Acupuncture](#).)

While social media can be a minefield of false or inaccurate information, it can also be a valuable source of legitimate cancer advice, Stacy Loeb, MD, MSc, of the NYU School of Medicine told the [National Cancer Institute](#).

Loeb said being active on social media and engaging with health professionals and patients has "helped foster scientific discussion about new research that is open to patients and the general public as well as international experts with a range of expertise."

"It's important for physicians and other experts to actively engage online to share evidence-based health information and ensure that the latest scientific findings are reaching the public through these large networks," she said.

For up-to-date information from verified sources, click Cancer Health's [Cancer Basics](#). It reads in part:

Cancer is not one but many diseases. How it is treated varies widely depending on cancer type and location, whether it has spread from its original site to other parts of the body (known as metastasis), genetic characteristics and patient preferences.

Cancer treatment has evolved rapidly in recent years, from surgery, radiation and chemotherapy to new types of targeted therapy and immunotherapy that help the immune system fight cancer.

These newer types of treatment are an example of precision or personalized medicine, tailored to individual patients. Today's targeted and immune-based therapies can be very effective, but they do not work for everyone and we don't yet fully understand how to tell in advance who will benefit.

Experimental therapies have traditionally been tested one drug at a time on one type of

cancer at a time. But new therapies are increasingly being studied in combination regimens for first-line treatment rather than waiting for one drug to fail and then trying another. In addition, there is a growing trend toward treatments that work against cancer with specific genetic characteristics, regardless of where it is located in the body.