People Undergoing Cancer Treatment Are More Prone to COVID-19 Misinformation

But cancer survivors are actually less likely to believe COVID-19 misinformation than everyone else.

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Many people undergoing treatment for cancer may be particularly susceptible to serious complications if they contract COVID-19. Unfortunately, they are also particularly susceptible to COVID-19 misinformation.

So finds a new study conducted by researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Of the 897 adults surveyed, approximately one third were undergoing treatment for cancer, one third were cancer survivors and one third had no cancer history. Results showed that people in treatment for cancer were more likely to believe false information about COVID-19 than those in the other two groups. But cancer patients who were no longer receiving treatment were the least likely to consume COVID-19 misinformation.

“These findings help us better understand the threat of COVID-19 misinformation in an already vulnerable population,” said lead author Jeanine Guidry, PhD, in a VCU press release about the study. “Understanding who is more likely to believe certain types of misinformation brings us closer to understanding why this is the case, which in turn may help us address this concerning issue.”

While this study, published in the journal Patient Education and Counseling, determined who is more vulnerable to misinformation, it is still unclear why people with cancer are more likely to trust such misinformation. “It may be that survivors currently undergoing treatment have heightened anxiety about how the current pandemic will impact their course of survival, leading them to seek out more information on the internet or via social media where they are more exposed to misinformation,” the researchers wrote in the study.

The researchers went on to suggest that increased information seeking may affect the way cancer patients process information, making them more likely to use cues rather than more critical methods to determine the credibility of information.

Those who were no longer undergoing cancer treatment, they noted, may have more experience determining the authenticity of news they read online. “Our cancer survivors, they’ve gone through this journey and come out the other end, knowing you can’t believe everything you read on the internet—they know you have to talk to your doctor and other people who are knowledgeable about these issues,” study senior author Bernard Fuemmeler, PhD, and Gordon D. Ginder, MD, told VCU News.

These results build on previous research that found that parents of young children with cancer were more likely to accept misinformation associated with COVID-19 than parents of children with no cancer history.

“Our previous study found that parents of pediatric cancer patients were more likely to consider misinformation about COVID-19 as true compared to parents of children with no cancer history,” Guidry said in the press release. “While neither of these groups were random population samples, and therefore the findings cannot be generalized, this is still concerning because these are both vulnerable groups, likely already under stress because of cancer diagnoses.”

These study results indicate that health care providers working with people undergoing cancer treatment should be more conscious of patients’ vulnerability to misinformation and therefore should work to more effectively address patients’ concerns about the pandemic and how it relates to their treatment.

Although data for the new study were collected prior to the widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines, Guidry said the findings are still applicable today.

“The COVID-19 vaccines and boosters so far have been very successful in preventing severe disease and mortality because of COVID-19, but infection with the virus and its variants is still a possibility, and misinformation about COVID-19 prevention and treatment is still spreading quickly, both online and in person,” she said. “To what extent specific, already vulnerable groups may be susceptible to these types of misinformation remains relevant, both for the remainder of this pandemic as well as for future public health emergencies.”

To read more, see “People With Lung Cancer Coped With Pandemic Better Than People Without Cancer.”

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