

# Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



ESTHER BUSH

## Pause: Take care before you share

This month, the Take Charge of Your Health page discusses COVID-19 and its impact in the past six months. With the number of COVID-19 messages coming across our television and phone screens daily, we are becoming overwhelmed with information about this virus that has taken the world by storm. In the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 was believed to only affect countries outside of the United States. As the virus has spread, now the United States is a known hot spot for COVID-19 and has taken the lives of more than 180,000 people (including more than 300 people in Allegheny County). We are challenged to mourn these deaths while still trying to comprehend the virus's devastating effects and how best to protect ourselves and our loved ones.

As we navigate this pandemic together, we have lost, in one way or another, the sense of what is "normal." What once was routine no longer feels as reliable now that our lives have become derailed. From employment, childcare, education, access to food and much more, we have had to shift into an unknown world where COVID-19 has controlled our lives for the past six months. Since March, when we began to self-quarantine, we have turned to religion, family, friends or community for support. Many of us have also turned to social media and other news sources in an ongoing attempt to gain an understanding of this virus.

Social media can be both helpful and harmful when it comes to learning about COVID-19. In this month's Take Charge of Your Health page, researcher Beth Hoffman discusses the ramifications associated with this first pandemic during the social media era, which makes it easy for information and misinformation to spread rapidly. The results are leaving people with both a virus pandemic and an infodemic of misinformation about the virus. So we should ask ourselves, when reading Facebook posts or Instagram stories that we see on a daily basis, how we can decipher which information is true. This is all the more important when we consider how COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black communities and continues to expose deep health disparities and social inequities.

Social media often fills people's immediate urge for information with its instant access, but often such information itself also changes quickly, if it is even accurate to begin with. The spread of misinformation on social media is so concerning that the United Nations has begun a campaign called "Pause. Take care before you share," which stresses sharing only trusted, accurate, science-based social media content (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/106742?2>). I, along with Ms. Hoffman and Dr. Sidani, encourage readers to "pause" before sharing information on social media.

Most of all, we need to be sure of reliable sources of information. For example, the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) is a great resource for the most up-to-date information about COVID-19

(<https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Health-Department/Resources/COVID-19/COVID-19.aspx>).

In recent numbers provided by ACHD, more than 10,000 people in Allegheny County have tested positive for COVID-19. With the death rate at 83% for people older than 70, we must do what we can every day to protect ourselves, as well as others. Wearing masks correctly, properly social distancing by staying six feet away from other people and washing our hands thoroughly and for at least twenty seconds are some basic ways to stop the spread of COVID-19.

2020 has been an unsettling year for us all. Our promise to you is that the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh will remain a trusted resource of information as we continue to navigate this pandemic together.

Please watch for the Take Charge of Your Health page next month when we shine a light on what it means to provide care during COVID-19.

Take charge and take care.  
Yours in the Movement,  
**Esther L. Bush, President and CEO**  
Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh



## 'COVID-19 Infodemic' Stopping the spread of misinformation

As the COVID-19 pandemic has gripped the United States, most people's lives have been derailed in some way—their health, employment, child care, education, etc. People have searched for ways to understand what is happening and how best to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. During the pandemic, an overwhelming amount of COVID-19 information has circled online and on social media. But is the information always accurate or helpful?

Social media often fills people's needs for information because it offers immediate access. But the information that is spreading through social media is not always updated or factual. The World Health Organization has deemed the spread of COVID-19 information an "infodemic," which it defines as an "overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—occurring during an epidemic," as serious enough for a coordinated response. The amount of information available about COVID-19 is so vast that it becomes difficult to sift through and confusing to find what is accurate. Inaccurate information—or "misinformation"—often travels quicker and can be taken as fact just as readily as factual information.

"This is the first pandemic in this age of ubiquitous social media use, which makes it that much easier for misinformation to travel rapidly all over the globe," says Beth Hoffman, MPH, research assistant with the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Behavioral Health, Media, and Technology and a PhD student at Pitt's Graduate School of Public Health. "We have a pandemic of a virus and an infodemic of misinformation about that virus."

Ms. Hoffman and her colleagues at Pitt are researching how the infodemic has spread in order to help stop the accidental sharing of inaccurate information. They have examined information shared online about COVID-19, especially on Twitter, and found it steeped in misinformation.

"From who's susceptible to COVID-19 to how can you protect yourself, every single facet of the coronavirus has been



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tagged in this infodemic," says Jaime E. Sidani, PhD, MPH, assistant professor of medicine, School of Medicine, and faculty member with the Center for Behavioral Health, Media, and Technology at Pitt.

One part of the COVID-19 infodemic that stood out to the researchers was the misinformation related to a potential vaccine for the virus. No vaccine exists yet. However, Ms. Hoffman and Dr. Sidani were surprised to see antivaccine sentiment and misinformation from groups on Twitter that are not usually against vaccines or spreaders of misinformation.

"This is particularly concerning because we have seen some targeting of this misinformation to communities that are particularly hard-hit by COVID-19, like the African American community," says Ms. Hoffman.

Recent polls show that only about 50% of people in the United States plan to get a COVID-19 vaccine when one is available. Communities hard-hit by COVID-19 are also hesitant about a vaccine (<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/06/just-50-americans-plan-get-covid-19-vaccine-here-s-how-win-over-rest>). Ms. Hoffman and Dr. Sidani want to learn the reasons why people are hesitant about a vaccine and correct any misinformation so that when a vaccine is available, people will have facts on which to base their decisions.

But how is COVID-19 misinformation spreading? Ms. Hoffman and Dr. Sidani cite the prevalence of social media and how quickly information travels digitally.

And, because physicians and researchers are trying to learn about the virus as it spreads, the science is rapidly evolving and being updated.

"Everything we know about COVID-19 has been changing constantly," says Ms. Hoffman. "When people were initially told to not wear masks so that health care professionals had enough, we didn't know about asymptomatic spreaders. Now we know that people can spread the virus without experiencing symptoms and that everyone should be wearing a mask. The virus has spread rapidly, the science changes sometimes weekly, social media use is prevalent, people have been at home using social media more—these are prime conditions for this viral spread of misinformation."

The researchers also note that the infodemic shows that our population needs more media and health literacy.

"People will share misinformation on social media without knowing whether it's true," says Dr. Sidani. "We have to empower people with the knowledge to look at who's spreading information, what their qualifications or potential biases are, whether the information makes sense and whether multiple, reputable outlets are reporting the same information."

The spread of misinformation on social media is so concerning that the United Nations has begun a campaign called "Pause. Take care before you share," which stresses sharing only trusted and accurate science-based social media content (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1067422>). Both Ms. Hoffman and Dr. Sidani also urge people to pause before sharing information on social media and to remember that we are all affected by COVID-19.

"This is scary and new for all of us," says Ms. Hoffman. "Scientists are working around the clock to get out the best available information. We can all do our parts by pausing and really knowing what we're sharing. It may feel overwhelming, but just as we can all do small things each day to help curb the spread of the virus, we can all take small actions to help prevent the spread of misinformation."

