

# Preventive health: 4 ways social media could be a game-changer

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The pandemic has upended nearly every aspect of American life and medicine, and it has amplified how quickly health information—and misinformation—is spread on social media. Learn more with the AMA about what physicians and other health authorities can do to use social media to improve public health.

Social media and other digital platforms that enable connectivity can influence patients while also expanding reach into health care, says a *JAMA* Viewpoint article published prior the pandemic's onset. That essential truth has become magnified in the months since a global pandemic was declared.

The *JAMA* article, "Evaluating the Potential Role of Social Media in Preventive Health Care," was written by Raina M. Merchant, MD, an assistant professor of emergency medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. The Viewpoint looks at how information on social media is shared, altered, disseminated and protected. It also addresses how strategies for engagement vary for different populations.

"Social media and other digital platforms that enable connectivity have unprecedented influence and are expanding their reach into health care," says the Viewpoint. "These platforms have a singular advantage that health care organizations do not have in that they are widely used across broad demographic categories."

As listed in the Viewpoint, here are some ways social media can be a game-changer for preventive health.

## Identify and address misinformation

When information is presented on social media, fact-checking declines. This is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic in which misinformation runs rampant. For health information, it is vital that individuals avoid misinformation. One example is the growing presence of anti-vaccine proponents online. These can appear to legitimize discourse about vaccine harms. The AMA is working to stop the scourge of social media misinformation on vaccines.

It can also contribute to outbreaks and resurgence of diseases that could have otherwise been prevented, such as measles and COVID-19. With any health intervention on social media, it is important to determine how to assess the success. This includes vetted health recommendations on the same platform as misinformation, according to the viewpoint.

Learn more from the AMA about four ways to counteract medical misinformation.

## **Disseminate and evolve recommendations**

As more scientific evidence becomes available, guidelines are constantly evolving. For example, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force regularly updates recommendations for preventive services in accordance with peer-reviewed science. When these changes occur, social media can be a useful tool to update this information.

However, “Facebook has not made clear its mechanisms for keeping its preventive services tool updated with the latest recommendation updates across conditions and organizations,” says the Viewpoint, adding that it is “unclear how it navigates health recommendations when trusted organizations or public opinion are in opposition.”

Because the Facebook tool does not include all high-priority preventive services, public health implications can occur if recommendations are not displayed.

Learn from the AMA about five reasons why physicians should use social media professionally.

## **Influence difficult-to-access populations**

A long-standing challenge for physicians and other health professionals has been accessing and influencing uninsured individuals and those without a primary care physician. This population is particularly vulnerable to poor health outcomes.

The simple act of sending a notification, making them social or dispelling misinformation will not remove their barriers to care. Instead, further efforts are needed to better understand how to effectively deliver information online to these high-risk groups in a way that will influence behavior change.

Learn more about how social media can help advance important health information.

## **Advance a public health agenda**

Technology in health care has long been met with skepticism, which can allow for careful evaluation. To advance preventive health, partnerships can be created between researchers, health organizations and social media industry leaders. In doing so, this can inform how success is measured through engagement, outcomes and harm.

Social media continues to receive the undivided attention of the public, which creates unique opportunities—and risks—that should be properly evaluated. This will create a better understanding of the influence and ability of technology-based platforms to advance preventive health.

Learn how to apply the enduring principles of medical ethics to the quickly moving world of social media.