

## PRINT- Battling the COVID-19 Misinformation Epidemic

Medical professionals and public health leaders are frustrated with the debunked conspiracy theories, discredited YouTube clips, and the social sharing of misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

OSF HealthCare Director of Infection Prevention and Control Lori Grooms says the many unknowns about COVID-19, because of its novel nature and the speed and scale at which it has spread, has created an anxious public understandably looking for answers. She says that's fueling the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation.

"With that comes a lot of anxiety and fear and when you have anxiety and fear you have people who begin to make statements and they don't necessarily understand everything about bacteria and viruses and how things are spread and what you need to do to stay safe," Grooms explained.

Some organizations which promote conspiracy theories online and anti-vaccine activists are actively spreading misinformation and big social media companies have struggled to keep up with either labeling or removing misleading content. The World Health Organization (WHO) called it an "infodemic" described as "an overabundance of information — some accurate and some not — rendering it difficult to find trustworthy sources of information and reliable guidance." Other public health organizations agree misinformation has reached epidemic proportions.

Grooms is concerned about the ability to rapidly spread wrong information via social media.

"My level of concern is about a seven just because as you have information that is not accurate out and floating around, you tend to make decisions and judgements that may not protect you or your loved ones," she observed.

There's also the danger of people throwing up their hands and not knowing what to believe or tuning out because of the glut of information. With that, important information needed to protect public health can get lost or ignored.

The science and benefits behind wearing a mask has presented the most perplexing problem for health organizations. Grooms knows the request is confusing because early on the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) wasn't pushing the message for everyone to wear a mask, out of fear individuals would buy up all the medical-grade or surgical masks, further threatening the health and safety of medical workers. But, now it appears to have become political.

"There's misinformation out there saying masks are not going to protect you. Well, that is right. It may not protect YOU but the whole idea of wearing it is to protect the people around you because you never know when you're in public, **who next to you might be**

immunocompromised or who next to you is at high risk of complications if they were to get sick,” she pointed out.

Throughout the pandemic, OSF HealthCare has worked with local health departments throughout Illinois and Michigan, including the Peoria City/County Public Health Department.

Administrator Monica Hendrickson acknowledges that debunking misinformation can be a challenge. “Misinformation has grown as the pandemic continued with an increase in conspiracy theories, suggestions of false-positive tests, and now refusal to contact trace and follow non-pharmaceutical interventions.”

Hendrickson said the decision to provide routine briefings were to offer consistent messaging and a platform for accurate and timely information for the public. “Much of the conversation was focused on the misinformation, but it did allow us to communicate the public health and science approach.”

So what’s the antidote for the continued spread of misinformation?

Grooms recommends getting information about COVID-19 directly from reliable sources such as the CDC or your state or local public health departments. On social media, she recommends considering the source of both the information and the person who is sharing the post. Are they reliable? Is the website link made to appear to be from a reliable news outlet but in fact only mimics the look and allows for a casual reader to be fooled?

Finally, as many health experts have recommended, Grooms advises limiting time on social media and while online, maintain a dispassionate approach to some posts designed to inflame or with people who are simply misinformed.

“We have to have grace with one another and we have to approach these conversations in a calm manner. We shouldn’t be pointing the finger at people just because they have some misinformation, Grooms suggested while also acknowledging the challenge. “It’s very frustrating because they’re coming across as very knowledgeable.”

Here is a link to the [CDC](#) for the latest accurate information about COVID-19 and guidance for preventing its spread.

Here are the latest updates from the [Illinois](#) and [Michigan](#) Public Health Departments.