



Patient Beware: Study Finds Potential for Massive Cancer Nutrition Misinformation on Pinterest

A multi-center team including researchers from Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine claims that the social media site Pinterest is rife with cancer misinformation. Their study found that about a third of posts focused on cancer nutrition made unsubstantiated claims to promote supplements and other products. The study was published in the journal *Cancer*.



Tracy Crane, Ph.D.

“Our results revealed a significant amount of misinformation about cancer and nutrition,” said Associate Professor Tracy Crane, Ph.D., co-lead on the Cancer Control Research Program and co-author of the study. “There’s a pervasiveness of health



claims that are not necessarily valid or coming from reliable sources.”

This is one of the first studies of its kind and an important step toward quantifying health misinformation and measuring its impact. The team searched Pinterest using terms like “cancer recipe” or “cancer nutrition,” trying to replicate the kinds of queries a patient might conduct. The results were eye-opening: Almost half the content they found was on for-profit sites, and there were numerous health claims that used the terms anti-cancer, cancer-fighting or cancer-busting. Many posts exaggerated the ability of food and/or supplements to cure the disease, and one claimed a “terminal cancer patient reverses disease with anti-angiogenic foods,” which is almost certainly false.

“Around 33% of the times we went to Pinterest, someone tried to sell us something that claimed to be anti-cancer or cancer cell killing,” said Dr. Crane. “These health claims may or may not be true. But put yourself in the shoes of a cancer patient. They see buzzwords around these products and may automatically be inclined to purchase them.”

The credentials for most posters were spotty at best. Only around 18% disclosed any health-related qualifications at all. Posts targeted both patients and caregivers, and many were focused on breast cancer.

“The key takeaway is for patients and providers to be aware that there is quite a bit of misinformation online, and that online misinformation should be part of the conversation between providers and patients,” said Dr. Crane. “Patients want to find out all they can about their disease, but we need to be concerned for their internet hygiene and guide them to



reliable places to find information, like the American Cancer Society, the American Society for Clinical Oncology and the American Association for Cancer Researchers.”

The authors encourage clinicians to discuss best practices to help patients determine if online information is reliable. They also suggest creating collateral materials, such as handouts, to help patients and caregivers find reputable sources.

“This is a call to action illustrating the need to better understand misinformation, particularly for cancer patients, and how to study the outcomes associated with these online sources,” said Dr. Crane. “We live in a digital world now, and that fundamentally changes how people get their information. Providers need to be aware of this and respond. We need to be asking more questions about where people are getting their information and how that may be affecting their health.”

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