

- Fake news

DIARY OF A DIETITIAN



Spotting misinformation online

The Vegan Society's Emily McKee delves into the murky depths of online disinformation and advises on how you can avoid being misled about health and dietary matters

In this age of the internet and social media, we have more access to information than ever before. On the one hand, this is empowering, because we can quickly and easily soak up new knowledge to inform decisions about our lives and health. On the other hand, misinformation (or 'fake news') is progressively more prevalent and difficult to spot.

In an online survey from 2023, the British Nutrition Foundation found that 56 per cent of people who use social media to learn more about health issues would make changes to their diet based on information seen on sites such as TikTok or Instagram. Unfortunately, the quality and accuracy of online nutrition-related information is frequently poor, particularly when the advice is given out via social media, with only 2 per cent of advice given on TikTok in agreement with UK public health guidelines. Different sources also tend to contradict each other, which can leave us feeling confused and frustrated.

Healthcare professionals, including registered dietitians and nutritionists, have raised concerns that following inaccurate dietary advice from online sources could cause people harm. This is particularly true for advice that promotes unnecessary or extreme dietary restrictions, which can cause a variety of negative physical and emotional side-effects, such as nutrient deficiencies, constipation, low energy levels, difficulty concentrating and reduced self-esteem.

In an ideal world, more thorough fact-checking and publication guidelines from websites and social media platforms would allow us to trust that the information we consume is accurate and of high quality. However, in the absence of this, there are some key questions you can ask yourself that will equip you to more critically

assess online health claims and help you to identify potential misinformation.

WHAT ARE THE CREDENTIALS OF THE AUTHOR OF THE ADVICE?

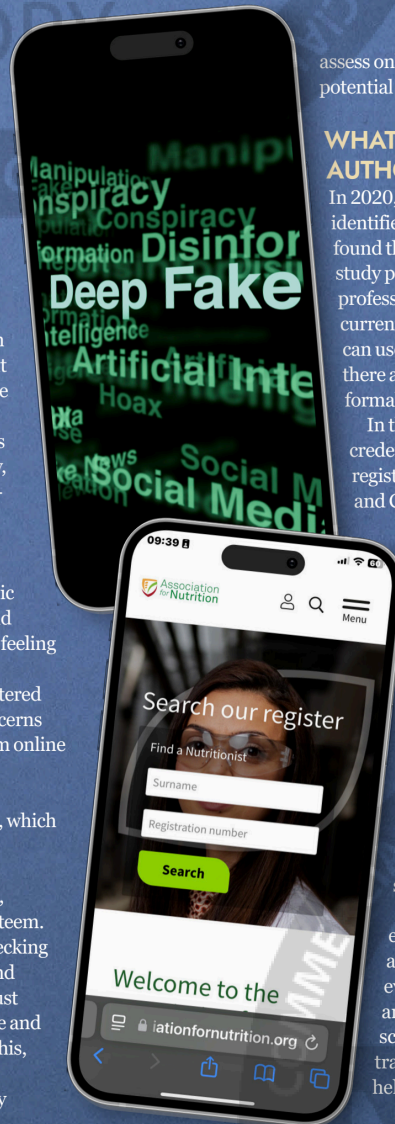
In 2020, a study aiming to better understand how people identified and discussed online dietary information found that only 5 per cent of the resources identified by study participants were written by nutrition professionals. The use of the title 'nutritionist' is currently unregulated in the UK, meaning that anyone can use it regardless of their qualifications. However, there are ways to check whether someone has had formal training in dietetics and nutrition.

In the UK, you can quickly check someone's credentials on the Association for Nutrition (AfN) register (for registered nutritionists) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) register (for dietitians). The code of conduct laid out for healthcare professionals means that we have a duty to provide information that is supported by current scientific evidence.

WHERE IS THE EVIDENCE?

Accurate health information, including about diet and nutrition, will always be backed up by evidence. This is usually an accumulation of many scientific studies over time. While what is considered 'true' or 'false' may change as new evidence and scientific techniques emerge, we usually find that several different studies on the same topic point us towards similar conclusions.

When a claim is being made online, is there evidence to back it up? Does the author talk about, or reference, scientific studies, or is the evidence based on their own personal experience and testimonials? Having a healthy level of scepticism about the origin of information, and tracing claims back to their original source, can help you to identify reliable content.



IS THERE A MATERIAL ANGLE?

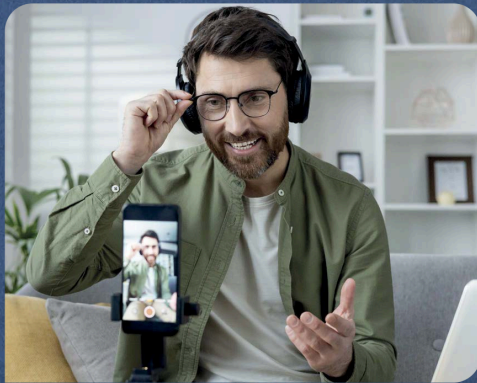
It is wise to investigate health claims further when promoters or influencers benefit financially from their content – for example, via partnerships or product sales. While product promotion doesn't always undermine the validity of the information, there is a risk of bias. It is important to check that there is evidence, using the criteria we mentioned earlier, to support the claims being made for their products.

One of the most common areas where dietary misinformation thrives is in the promotion of weight-loss plans and supplements. Always be cautious of promoters who proclaim that their products or supplements are the key to achieving your health goals, particularly when these products are unregulated or unsupported by current evidence.

IS IT TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

Bold claims, oversimplified 'one size fits all' solutions and quick fixes often appear more attractive than the reality – that making small, positive and consistent changes over time adds up. What these changes look like are usually very individual. While there are general principles that underpin a healthy, balanced diet, what this looks like in practice is shaped by additional factors, such as our age, health background, culture, preferences and ethics.

Instead of making drastic changes that completely overhaul your usual diet, you should try to focus on adjusting your habits in a more measured and stepwise way. Although this approach is much less likely to go viral than the latest diet trend, it is much more likely to be sustainable and support you in creating a healthy, balanced and enjoyable lifestyle. ♥



Left Anybody can tell you anything online, but it's up to you to do your own research.

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For information about a healthy vegan diet written by The Vegan Society's in-house dietitians, see vegansociety.com/nutrition