# Misleading cancer cure claims rampant on TikTok, study finds



A recent study has highlighted significant concerns regarding the spread of misleading and potentially dangerous cancer treatment information on social media platforms, particularly TikTok. The research reveals that a vast majority of cancer cure claims made by influencers are false, underscoring the risks faced by young users seeking medical advice online.

Dr Stephanie Alice Baker, a reader in sociology at City St George’s, University of London, conducted the study after examining 200 TikTok posts related to cancer cures. According to Dr Baker, approximately 81 per cent of these posts promoted false or unsupported cancer treatments. The remaining 19 per cent either offered legitimate medical advice, contained satirical content, or commemorated individuals who had passed away from cancer. While Dr Baker emphasised that this preliminary research cannot be seen as representative of all content on the platform, it nonetheless exposes a broader problem of cancer misinformation circulating on social media.

“The issue I find very concerning is that people are looking for a miracle cure and you do have certain creators who can exploit that,” Dr Baker told MailOnline. She noted that many creators promote bizarre and unsuitable remedies such as soursop herbal tea, oregano oil, apricot kernels, and even dog dewormer—which is toxic for humans—as supposed cancer cures. A quick search on social media platforms reveals similar claims, including the promotion of cannabis oil, lemon juice in hot water, and unconventional psychological methods like “subconscious reprogramming” and “mindset healing.”

Dr Baker pointed out that these misleading posts are not confined to TikTok but affect other short-form video platforms as well. The nature of these platforms, which blend content from users’ subscriptions with algorithmically recommended posts, leads to a vast and often unsolicited exposure to misinformation. This is compounded by the fact that many young people use social media as a primary search tool. According to a survey cited by Dr Baker, 67 per cent of 18-to-24-year-olds use Instagram and 62 per cent use TikTok for research purposes, surpassing Google, which was preferred by 61 per cent of respondents.

“Around the world, these platforms are being used for both entertainment and searching for information,” Dr Baker explained. “So it makes the need to have reliable information on these platforms much more important.”

Another worrying aspect of this phenomenon is the monetisation of misleading cancer cures. The study found that many content creators use “link in bio” tools to direct viewers to websites selling the products they promote, allowing them to earn commissions even with a relatively small following. Dr Baker described monetisation as “her biggest argument” uncovered during the research, stating: “Overwhelmingly, creators were monetising cures.”

Shell Rowe, a TikTok influencer from Billericay, Essex, who has survived non-Hodgkin lymphoma four times since 2019, shared her perspective on the issue. Now 25, Rowe has been cancer-free for three years and uses her platform, which has nearly 900,000 followers, to foster a positive community for fellow patients. She expressed strong disapproval of videos promoting false cancer treatments, calling them “disgusting.”

“When you’re put in a position of desperation and you don’t know where else to turn, you don’t know what you’re willing to try and that’s what people are possibly taking advantage of,” Rowe told MailOnline. She described how her own experience with harsh treatments—including CAR-T cell therapy that caused severe brain swelling—sometimes left her incapable of rational thought or critical decision-making.

Rowe observed that many young people now use TikTok as a search engine for everyday questions, including health inquiries. This behaviour increases the risk of encountering harmful misinformation, especially if the information comes from creators with whom viewers have developed a parasocial relationship—a perceived closeness arising from frequent interaction online.

“You have to have curiosity and question things and fact-check them because anyone can become vulnerable to a scam,” Rowe advised. “Please speak to your medical team because they will know better and they can give you unbiased advice. They are not making commission – they will give you real, legitimate, medical advice.”

The issue has received renewed attention following the release of the Netflix series Apple Cider Vinegar earlier this year. The documentary recounts the story of Australian influencer Belle Gibson, who was publicly revealed in 2015 as a fraud after claiming to have cured cancer through nutrition and alternative medicine. Inspired by this, Dr Baker undertook her research on cancer misinformation, and Rowe said the series had a profound emotional impact on her.

“It was absolutely gut-wrenching. My partner and I were just in bits thinking, ‘That could have happened to me, easily,’” Rowe said. “You think, ‘Oh, I’ll be savvy to this,’ but when you’re desperate, you don’t know what you’re willing to try, and that’s what people are possibly taking advantage of.”

A TikTok spokesperson stated: “We are proud that TikTok is a place where our community can share their own stories or experiences about medical treatment but do not allow harmful medical misinformation on our platform. We also work closely with independent fact checkers to verify content and partners, including the World Health Organization, to promote reliable health content.”

The findings from this study and the experiences shared by cancer survivor Shell Rowe shed light on the complexity and scale of the challenge posed by health misinformation on social media platforms popular with younger generations.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://health.osu.edu/health/cancer/cancer-misinformation-on-tiktok> - This article supports the claim that cancer misinformation is widespread on social media platforms like TikTok, highlighting concerns about misleading information and unproven treatments.
* <https://www.citystgeorges.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2024/november/tiktok-fake-cancer-cures-radicalisation> - This study by Dr. Stephanie Alice Baker found that approximately 81% of cancer cure claims on TikTok are fake, emphasizing the platform's role in spreading misinformation.
* <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11667741/> - This research paper explores how alternative health and conventional medicine discourses on TikTok contribute to the spread of misinformation, highlighting the visual strategies used in misleading narratives.
* <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37505790/> - This study discusses the exposure and reactions to cancer treatment misinformation on social media, including the psychological impact on individuals and their willingness to intervene against false claims.
* <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-11-cancer-touted-tiktok-videos-fake.html> - This article details the study by Dr. Stephanie Alice Baker, which found that only 19% of monitored videos on TikTok contained legitimate medical advice, while the rest promoted false cancer treatments.