

EDITORIAL

Myths and Misconceptions about Coronavirus Disease 2019 – How to Control the Infodemic?

V. Raghuram

Ever since a novel corona virus designated as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019 achieving pandemic proportions and subsequently spreading rapidly across major continents by international air traffic causing acute respiratory infection and death, there has been another storm brewing simultaneously. This storm is nothing but the huge amount of information being in circulation through the omnipresent social media. Most of this unverified and unreliable information reaching a large section of people is creating various myths and misconceptions regarding the cause, management and prevention of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Myth is commonly considered as a folklore genre consisting of narratives/stories that play a fundamental role in human beings' everyday lives. These are often endorsed by leaders/rulers/religious preachers and explain to a great extent the functioning of a society and shape the beliefs of people. There is a potential role of cultural and religious beliefs/traditions/customs/rituals, which add a flavor to the public's mindset in a particular region/country and influence the propagation or acceptance of a myth. Myths related to various infections have been prevalent from time to time, and it takes a long battle to demystify the existing myths by providing a realistic evidence-based approach.^[1]

Currently, prevailing myths related to COVID-19 infection can be categorized into those related to the spread of infection, source of spread of infection, preventive measures, and cure.^[1]

Those myths related to spreading/transmission of COVID-19 have been bothering the public to think twice before using newspapers/vegetables, etc. and many are avoiding non-vegetarian foods with the fear of being infected. Further, many have hoarded or stockpiled antibiotics, essential oils, Vitamin C tablets, masks, sanitizers, etc. to protect themselves from running out of stock of these commodities. These myths can also lead to a false sense of security of being immune to the infection

and resultant exposure to high-risk situations. These myths can be very dangerous, as these can lead to over-complacency and lead to a reduction in actually needed practices, or following some of these myths can lead to other health hazards.^[1]

Many myths related to the spread of infection are compounded with the stigma associated with patients recovered from COVID-19 infection and the health care workers, working in COVID-19 wards/hospitals. These are leading to a social boycott of people avoiding interaction with the persons recovered from COVID-19 infection or those suspected of having COVID-19 infection.^[2]

In the times of widespread Internet accessibility to a large proportion of population, the need for regulation of content that should be made available to public is more acute than ever before. Circulation of unregulated information can facilitate perpetuation of these myths and misconceptions leading to unnecessary hospital admissions, hazardous self-medication practices, and spreading of panic among the public.

Strict legal action needs to be taken against people spreading fake news/making false claims during the pandemic. More and more stringent action and punishments must be declared by the Judiciary system to control the spread of myths/fake claims. The mainstream media should also be very cautious in presenting the different information about the COVID-19 infection. All these myths are having a widespread impact on public viewpoint and disease transmission. Therefore, possible and prompt steps should be taken by appropriate authorities to demystify the myths in due time.

Efforts to address misinformation on social media have special urgency with the emergence of COVID-19. In one effort, the World Health Organization designed and publicized

Correspondence: V. Raghuram, Department of Community Medicine, Trichy SRM Medical College Hospital and Research Centre, Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: raghu3873@gmail.com

How to cite: Raghuram V. Myths and Misconceptions about Coronavirus disease 2019 – How to Control the Infodemic? Ann Community Health 2021;9(2):1-2.

Department of Community Medicine, Trichy SRM Medical College Hospital and Research Centre, Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India

shareable infographics to debunk coronavirus myths. Studies have shown that exposure to a corrective graphic on social media reduced misperceptions about the science of false COVID-19 prevention strategies.^[3]

While the efforts are underway to understand and control the pandemic by governments, national and international health agencies, there needs to be an effort from the public and media in quelling the infodemic which would complement these actions and help in overcoming the crisis that we find ourselves in.

REFERENCES

1. Sahoo S, Padhy SK, Ipsita J, Mehra A, Grover S. Demystifying the myths about COVID-19 infection and its societal importance. *Asian J Psychiatry* 2020;54:102244.
2. Bhandari H. Doctor Harassed by his Dwarka Housing Society. India: The Hindu; 2020.
3. Vraga EK, Bode L. Addressing COVID-19 misinformation on social media-preemptively and responsively. *Emerg Infect Dis* 2021;27:396-403.