

Playbook Overview

Rumors can make health events more complicated, reduce trust in public health efforts, and lead to negative health impacts. The [Practical Playbook for Addressing Health Rumors](#) provides guidance on ways public health and medical professionals can set themselves up for success, make decisions on when they need to act to address health-related rumors, choose which actions and approaches might be useful to their audiences and information needs, and evaluate how their efforts are working. It also provides tools, templates, and examples to help in these efforts. Although there is no “silver bullet” to solve the problem of public health rumors, this playbook helps to lay the groundwork for health communicators such as yourself to address the issue.

For a rapid review of content within the playbook, use the checklist below. The rest of the playbook outlines these tasks with more specific tips and tools for how to approach the following activities.

Set yourself up for success before rumors spread

- ☐ Identify ‘prework’ or things you can do before rumors come up. Think ahead—before a rumor spreads or an emergency occurs—about possible rumors, successful approaches from the past, ways to improve the public’s resilience to false or misleading narratives and their knowledge of public health activities, and conduct the work outlined in the playbook.
- ☐ Put together a team you can call on when you need to address a rumor. Work to understand resources, responsibilities, procedures, skills, and available staff and experts you can turn to during a response. Leadership buy-in is important as well.
- ☐ Connect with communities and build partnerships. Engaging with community members and building partnerships enables communication through trusted messengers and networks. These relationships are best built over time.
- ☐ Get to know your audience. Make sure you understand who your audience is, the kind of communication they prefer, and how to be responsive to their needs.
- ☐ Set up a way to identify rumors. To fill information gaps and respond to rumors, figure out which questions you will need to answer and what misleading claims are circulating. Establish social listening activities ahead of time through community partners and/or by using technology platforms.
- ☐ Answer your audiences’ questions and concerns quickly. You may be able to prevent the need for a rumor response by filling information gaps and answering questions quickly and effectively. Getting ahead of rumors in this way is often more effective than responding to rumors that start to circulate later.

Decide whether to address the rumor

- ☐ Identify your goal for responding to a rumor. Determine the intended outcome of messaging efforts, any larger goals and specific objectives you want to achieve, and what audiences want or need in the situation.
- ☐ Identify what influences your decision to respond. Build a common understanding of why you want or need to respond. Identify the factors you should consider when choosing your response to a rumor. Factors often revolve around the seriousness of the rumor, capacity to act, and potential consequences.

- ❑ Decide whether you will address the rumor. Not all rumors can or should be addressed. You and your team will need to consider all influencing factors together to decide if you should take action to address rumors. Sometimes, not acting is the best decision. During emergencies, these decision-making processes may change as priorities change.

Take action to address rumors

- ❑ Identify the kind of rumors that are spreading. Rumors often recycle common misleading narratives. These patterns can help you organize your approaches to misinformation and consider actions that may be successful for a narrative of concern. Consider levels of risk from rumors, which can influence the extent of efforts that should be made to manage them.
- ❑ Characterize your priority audience and your communication goals for them. Upon detecting rumors, identify the audiences you want to focus on. Often, these are groups of people who may be most impacted or would be most likely to believe a rumor. Goals for these populations often include raising awareness about relevant facts, building resilience, and/or providing factual counterpoints.
- ❑ Choose an action approach. You can approach rumors in different ways, and some require more resources than others. Often, these include amplifying accurate information, filling information voids, leveraging trusted messengers and engaging communities, fact-checking/debunking, prebunking/inoculating, and/or improving health literacy.
- ❑ Select communications channels and trusted messengers. The best communications channel(s) for a message that addresses a rumor is the platform(s) on which it is spreading. Prioritize these channels by how accessible messages will be to target audiences. You can add other channels—like social media, in-person engagement opportunities, and traditional and digital media—to your priority list based on their popularity, user-friendliness, and/or trustworthiness.
- ❑ Choose strategic ways to frame your messages. You can guide audiences toward receiving messages in intended ways by framing them strategically. Match messages to the motivations of audiences, such as by framing information that audiences might not accept easily in a way that aligns with their moral values or by focusing on desirable outcomes or benefits they can receive.
- ❑ Create and disseminate your messages using good practices. Messages should be structured in ways that highlight empathy, connect with audiences' values, empower action, and address misleading claims. Use plain and accessible language, tone, and visuals that resonate with audiences when creating messages. You may need to adjust approaches to be effective across different audiences.
- ❑ Even if you can't act, address rumors in other ways. Sometimes it may not be appropriate to respond to a rumor. Still, you can rely on strategic partners, amplify trusted voices, and continue to engage in community outreach activities. It is also important to keep reassessing the decision not to act in case the situation gets worse.

Evaluate key messages

- ❑ Gather feedback about your messages. Although understanding the effectiveness of messages and efforts to manage rumors are difficult, these activities will help you know if messages are understandable, relevant, or effective and if they are reaching intended audiences.