

When Social Media Becomes a Source of Poisoning Risk: What to Know About Viral Trends and Misinformation

Social media has become a major source of health and wellness information, particularly among younger users, but it also introduces significant poisoning-related risks. Research and public health reporting indicate that many adolescents and young adults now use platforms like TikTok as a primary “search engine” for health advice, often prioritizing relatable creators over trained medical professionals. This cultural shift has created new challenges for public health messaging, especially when viral content spreads faster than evidence-based information, which can increase exposure to misinformation and unsafe recommendations.

Wellness Content and Health Misinformation

On the wellness side, users may encounter misleading claims about “non-toxic” living, detox routines, or supplement use that exaggerate the dangers of common products or promotes unproven or unsafe alternatives. These trends can contribute to unnecessary fears around everyday exposures or lead individuals into making unsafe decisions involving medications, household products, or dietary supplements. Public health experts have raised concerns that algorithm-driven wellness content can amplify misinformation and normalize inaccurate health beliefs, particularly when it is delivered in short, engaging, and emotionally appealing formats.

Viral Challenges and Direct Poisoning Risks

At the same time, viral social media challenges have been linked to more direct poisoning risks, especially among teens and young adults. One widely reported example is the “Benadryl Challenge,” in which individuals intentionally take excessive amounts of diphenhydramine (an over-the-counter antihistamine) to induce hallucinations. Poison Centers and Emergency Departments have documented serious adverse effects from these incidents, including cardiac complications, seizures, and fatalities. Other dangerous trends have included misuse of sleep aids, nicotine products, and inhalation of household substances (often referred to as “chroming”), all of which can result in severe toxicity, respiratory distress, and hospitalization. These patterns highlight how quickly online challenges can translate into real-world medical emergencies.

Who is Most at Risk?

Across both wellness misinformation and viral challenges, people of all ages may be affected, but exposure patterns differ by generation.

- Gen Z & Gen Alpha: More likely to use short-form video platforms like TikTok as a primary source of health information, increasing exposure to peer-style advice, viral trends, and misinformation. In fact, one recent survey of 1,000 Gen Z users conducted by [Zing Coach](#) found that approximately 1 in 11 users reported experiencing negative health issues after attempting trends or following advice from TikTok.
- Millennials & Gen X: Often combine online research with professional medical guidance but may still encounter, engage with, or share trending health content
- Baby Boomers: More likely to rely on traditional sources of health information, but still at risk for misinformation and accidental medication or household exposures

No matter the generation, verifying health information with trusted, evidence-based sources is essential before acting on it. While social media can be a helpful tool for connection and awareness, it is not a substitute for medical guidance.

How Poison Centers Can Help

Poison Centers play a critical role in identifying emerging trends, responding to exposures in real time, and providing free, confidential, expert guidance when people are unsure whether something is safe. If you have a question or concern about something you see online or in your community, call the Wisconsin Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222 or visit www.wisconsinpoison.org for support.

Citations & Resources:

American Association of Poison Control Centers / America's Poison Centers (role of poison centers): <https://poisoncenters.org/>

Contemporary Pediatrics (Benadryl Challenge overview and risks):
<https://www.contemporarypediatrics.com/view/dangers-of-the-tiktok-benadryl-challenge>

Journal/public health commentary on TikTok health misinformation (overview context):
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/>

National Institutes of Health / MedlinePlus (diphenhydramine safety information):
<https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a682539.html>

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (social media & health misinformation context): <https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/>