

Address — don't sidestep — health misinformation to debunk falsehoods, study finds | Nieman Journalism Lab

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A common way to tackle misinformation, especially health misinformation, is to ignore it. And this is a strategy often employed by authority figures — sidestep the misinformation, don't give it airtime, and it might just go away.

But the results of a new study suggest that this method of combating health misinformation is less effective than addressing and then debunking misinformation head on. The results were published November 10 in BMJ Global Health.

To conduct the study, researchers at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden recruited more than 730 volunteers in Sierra Leone, and tested them on their knowledge of “typhoid-malaria.” Typhoid and malaria infections can co-occur, but rarely, and a common misconception among the people in the African nation is that they are a joint condition, and that they are caused by the same underlying culprits. (In actuality, typhoid and malaria are very different: Typhoid is caused by bacteria and spread through unsanitary water, but malaria is caused by a parasite that is spread by mosquitoes).

“The diagnostics for typhoid are really poor,” said Maike Winters, a research coordinator at the Karolinska Institute's Department of Global Health and first author of the new study.

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