

# Crafting Effective Health Communications: Principles for Clarity and Practical Impact

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October 2025

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# Framing effective health communications around safety and risk

The *Crafting Effective Health Risk and Safety Communications: Principles for Clarity and Practical Impact* project is informed by extensive quantitative and qualitative research.

The Reagan-Udall Foundation for the FDA (Foundation) has developed **seven core principles** health communicators, including government agencies and others, can follow when creating and sharing messaging about health risks and safety for the public.

## Crafting Effective Health Communications: Principles for Clarity and Practical Impact

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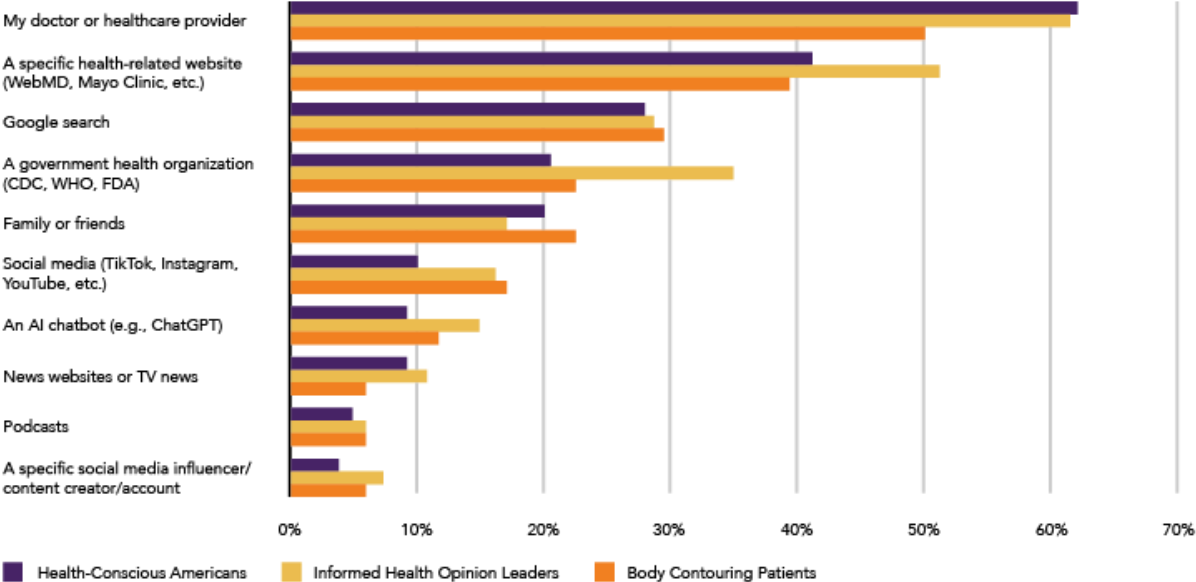
OCTOBER 2025

# There has been recent shift in how people obtain and absorb health information, as well as which sources are considered "trustworthy"

- **Perceived failures by traditional health authorities** during the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a **decline in public trust** in these institutions.
- **Diminishing confidence in conventional information sources** and an increase in ease of access to health-related material online has led the public to turn to a **wider variety of information sources** than ever before.
- People now rely on what they perceive to be more **authentic** and **personal** sources for their health news and information.

## When you have a health-related question, which sources do you trust most for information?

Showing top 3



Penta x Reagan-Udall Q5: When you have a health-related question, which sources do you trust most for information? This question was asked as part of the survey conducted in Phase 4: Quantitative research. This survey was fielded between June 24–July 2, 2025.

# To build a new framework for health risk and safety communications, the Foundation conducted multi-phase research to understand how and where people get their health information

To produce the messaging framework and analysis detailed in this report, the Foundation conducted multiphase research — consulting with expert communicators, health care professionals, and consumers to better understand the health communications landscape.



**Phase 1:** Exploratory research



**Phase 2:** Qualitative research



**Phase 3:** Additional in-depth interviews and AI best practices review



**Phase 4:** Quantitative survey and message testing

# Expert sources largely agree on that traditional risk communications follow six pillars

## Transparency & honesty

- Accurate, clear, and complete information builds trust and credibility.
- Acknowledging uncertainties and openly discussing what is known and unknown fosters public confidence.

## People-centric messaging

- Effective communication must consider the social, cultural, political, and religious context of those they are seeking to reach.
- Tailoring messages to align with public values, beliefs, and concerns increases their effectiveness.

## Timely & accessible information

- Prompt communication about safety concerns enables the public to make informed decisions.
- Accessibility is essential for diverse populations, including for those with different literacy levels and languages.

## Building & maintaining trust

- Providing accurate, clear, and complete information builds trust and credibility.
- Acknowledging uncertainties and openly discussing what is known and unknown fosters public confidence.

## Coordination with credible sources

- Providing accurate, clear, and complete information builds trust and credibility.
- Acknowledging uncertainties and openly discussing what is known and unknown fosters public confidence.

## Pre-testing & evaluation of messages

- Providing accurate, clear, and complete information builds trust and credibility.
- Acknowledging uncertainties and openly discussing what is known and unknown fosters public confidence.

# However, our communications environment is now characterized by deep skepticism toward traditional sources of health information

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**The changing communications landscape has upended some widely held conventions in health risk and safety communications practices, leading to the need for a new, broadened, and updated approach.**

- Conventional wisdom does not account for how perceptions of "authority" have changed in recent years. Many people are skeptical toward traditional news media, government sources, and even some health care professionals.
- The Foundation's research found that people now rely on — and place their trust in — a fragmented mix of sources, particularly seeking out individual stories from everyday people.

"Many people are in a state of panic regarding their health... There's growing concern, particularly among women, that they're being over-medicated and inadequately treated by doctors... **Traditional health information sources have lost credibility for many people.**"

— *Health Influencer*

"For me, it's social media because I don't really watch the news. **I get pretty much all my news from social media or word of mouth.**"

— *Health-Conscious American*

"I like the Joe Rogan podcast ... and the professionals that he gets on there when they're talking about mental health, physical health, and everything like that — **I trust that more than what the FDA is telling me.**"

— *Outspoken Health Skeptic*

# In an evolving health communication landscape, people are turning to a widening variety of information sources

Consumers refer to various online sources when seeking to learn more about health issues and when making decisions about health risks and safety for themselves and their families.

## New information sources/communicators...

- Social media platforms such as TikTok, Reddit, Instagram, and X
- Online communities and forums
- Podcasts
- Health influencers
- AI chatbots such as ChatGPT
- AI summaries commonly found in internet search engines

Communicate to the public using...

## Evolving language practices

- **Sharing real human stories:** Viewers and listeners trust lived experiences complemented with data
- **Affirming personal choice:** Emphasizing the individual's choice in what action they should take through "you can"/"you have" phrases
- **Using empowering language:** Empowering individuals to take responsibility for their own health through phrases like "take control" and "figure out what works for you"
- **Adopting a conversational and transparent tone:** Framing information as a conversation with the audience to maintain transparency
- **Framing health as an individual journey:** Framing health as a journey rooted in personal agency through phrases like "health journey" and "your own path"

# Seven core principles to clearly and effectively communicate health messaging

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The Foundation's research led to the development of **seven core communications principles** for how to best frame messaging around health risks and safety. These principles underwent robust quantitative testing, which demonstrated that applying them to existing health messages improved their ability to effectively meet consumers on their terms and also helped direct the public to action.

The following slides outline the principles and provide examples of how they can be effectively applied in health messaging.

# Messaging explicitly designed to convey these seven principles performed well in testing



## 1. Messages should be accessible and resonate across a range of media.

"The raw eggs and flour in ready-to-cook foods like cookie dough can carry dangerous bacteria like Salmonella and E. coli. Eating these foods uncooked can make you very sick. Each year, foodborne bacteria cause 3,000 deaths in the U.S. Baking cookie dough is a simple step to protect yourself and the people you love."



## 2. Messages should convey transparency and honesty.

"We're actively working with state and local partners to investigate illnesses resulting from a Listeria outbreak across multiple states. [LINK TO MAP SHOWING AFFECTED STATES] This has been linked to the following products: [insert exact product name]. Take precautions for you and your family: throw away all [insert exact product name]. While not everyone becomes very unwell when infected, Listeria can be serious, especially in pregnant women and newborns, adults over 65, and people with weakened immune systems. If you or someone you know is at risk and is experiencing symptoms (fever, tiredness, muscle aches), contact your health care provider immediately."



## 3. Messages should anticipate confirmation bias to engage selective interpreters.

"Your body is unique. Not everyone responds to body contouring procedures in the same way. Before undergoing a procedure, ask the practitioner performing your procedure to explain how long it could take to achieve your desired results and if you'll need multiple treatment sessions."

# Messaging explicitly designed to convey these seven principles performed well in testing



## 4. Messages need to build trust by demonstrating relatability and authenticity.

"[Government agency] is investigating illnesses related to an outbreak of E.coli across multiple states. While the specific ingredient causing this hasn't yet been confirmed, most sick people report eating the [insert exact product name]. This investigation is ongoing. The [government agency] is continuing to monitor the situation actively and will provide timely updates as it develops. If you have already consumed the product and are experiencing symptoms of E.coli (diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, stomach pain), contact your health care provider to report symptoms and receive care immediately."



## 5. Messages need to contain sufficient detail.

"While not everyone becomes very unwell when infected, Listeria can be serious, especially in pregnant women and newborns, adults over 65, and people with weakened immune systems. If you or someone you know is at risk and is experiencing symptoms (fever, fatigue, muscle aches), contact your health care provider immediately."

# Messaging explicitly designed to convey these seven principles performed well in testing



## **6. Messages should emphasize personal choice.**

"New studies [[LINK TO STUDY](#)] have shown that brominated vegetable oil (BVO), an ingredient used to keep drinks from separating, is no longer considered safe in food. We're removing it from food and drinks to protect your health. Take control while we make this change: Check labels for BVO and consider products with safer ingredients instead."



## **7. Messaging should convey proactivity.**

"Your health comes first. Make sure you're staying safe by asking the health care provider who is performing your procedure about how they clean devices between patients and if they use new disposable parts for each procedure session. Advocating for yourself is the best way to avoid complications!"

# Our research pointed to a sharp increase in the use of AI to search of health information

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- The rise of generative AI has led to a rapid increase in people using AI tools to look up health information and ask generative AI tools for health advice.
- While it is not a substitute for visiting a health care professional, AI can be a useful tool to conduct preliminary health research.
- However, when using AI to search for health information or advice, it is important that users keep certain best practices in mind.
- The guidelines outlined in the following slide should inform efforts from health information communicators to educate people on how they can safely and effectively use AI tools to find health information on their own.


# We developed a best practices guide to support those using AI to gather health information

- **Use AI as a supplementary tool:** Users should turn to AI as a tool to begin or supplement their research rather than thinking of it as a comprehensive research tool that provides completely accurate information.
- **Engage in rigorous verification:** AI outputs should never be taken at face value. It is important to fact check AI output for accuracy and reliability (e.g., broken links, outdated or false info, hallucinations, etc.), particularly when it comes to health information.
- **Be specific in what you ask, but avoid sharing sensitive information:** Precision is key — vague prompts will lead to broad, generalized answers, which may not be accurate or provide users with the information they are seeking.
- **Ask for credible sources:** AI platforms scrape a wide range of internet sources to find information and answer users' questions — all of these sources may not be reputable or have verified information. Users should always ask AI platforms or chatbots to cite credible sources for all their information.
- **Follow up:** If your AI's first output is off the mark, try a follow-up request with instructions for improvement, and be specific about what you are looking for in the follow-up prompt.
- **Avoid conflicting terms and ambiguity:** Long and complex prompts sometimes include ambiguous or contradictory terms. The most effective prompts use positive language and avoid negative language — in other words, “Do say ‘do,’ and don't say ‘don't.’”

The FDA has a powerful opportunity to guide public understanding, not just by stating the facts, but by connecting those facts to people's everyday concerns, values, and decisions.

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- The seven principles outlined in this report offer a practical framework for reaching people. They emphasize **accessibility, relatability, transparency, and personal choice**, while reinforcing the importance of **timeliness** and **detail** without becoming overwhelming.
- The goal of this framework, and the insights shared in this report, is to support communicators in developing messages that inform, empower, and advance public health and safety. By applying it to their messaging, **FDA communicators can cut through noise to resonate with the public.**



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