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# How vaccine misinformation made the COVID-19 death toll worse

MAY 16, 2022 · 5:07 AM ET

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION

By A Martínez, Allison Aubrey

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As the U.S. nears one million deaths from COVID-19, analysis finds nearly a third of those deaths could have been prevented — if people had been vaccinated. [Transcript](#)

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A MARTÍNEZ, HOST:

American flags continue to fly at half staff in memory of those who've lost their lives to COVID. At one point, 1 million deaths seemed unthinkable. Now, according to the Johns Hopkins University COVID tracker, we're nearly there. It comes as cases and hospitalizations are again on the rise. And what makes the number more gut-wrenching is that many of these COVID deaths were preventable. NPR's Allison Aubrey joins us now. Allison, you've covered this pandemic from the very, very start. How did we get here?

ALLISON AUBREY, BYLINE: Oh, good morning. I think the great paradox is that the U.S. has played a huge role, an outsized role, in creating the vaccines and creating the medicines, the way out of the pandemic, thanks to the ingenuity of scientists and vaccine makers. But simultaneously, we've been hit so hard due to fragmentation and inequalities in our health care system, as well as vaccine hesitancy, often fueled by politically motivated misinformation. Consider this, A - if you tally up the number of unvaccinated people who died from COVID after vaccines were open to all adults last year, it's about 319,000 lives lost, according to a Brown University analysis. That is nearly one-third of all COVID deaths in the U.S., people who could be alive if they'd gotten vaccinated. I talked to a couple of doctors about this, Nicole Baldwin, a pediatrician in Cincinnati, and Calvin Johnson in Los Angeles.

NICOLE BALDWIN: It's really tragic.

CALVIN JOHNSON: It's just heartbreaking, you know, when it was preventable.

BALDWIN: And I wonder if there's something else we could have done.

AUBREY: Both Baldwin and Johnson have spent a lot of time trying to tackle misinformation. Yet, they point out, only about 30% of kids aged 5 to 11 are fully vaccinated.

MARTÍNEZ: We heard Dr. Baldwin wondering what else could have been done. I mean, why does she think so many families are hesitant to vaccinate?

AUBREY: There are multiple factors, but she points to social media. The decision to vaccinate, A, is no longer just a conversation between doctor and patient. Anti-vaccine influencers have gained so much traction. And more people spend more time engaging with them.

BALDWIN: I think the challenge is, you can say almost anything that you want to say on social media. You can claim expertise in a field whether or not you have it. And the algorithms on these channels push out content that people are looking at. So it's terrifying. It's frustrating.

AUBREY: Because, she says, the content being pushed out is often not the evidence-based or factual. It's often the more sensationalized content from influencers who intend to mislead or scare people.

MARTÍNEZ: All right. So who is pushing the anti-vaccine content? Who are these influencers?

AUBREY: Well, people who get attention on social media promoting anti-vaccine messages are often selling books or supplements or natural alternatives to vaccines. They scare people about vaccines because they benefit from it. Amid COVID, there's also been more politically motivated influencers, people against vaccines, because they don't want the government telling them what to do. These influencers can - have basically leveraged each other's networks and together have amassed very large followings. I spoke to a mother, Lydia Greene (ph). She's the mom of three children. She says she's seen firsthand how impressionable people can be to the messages of influencers with big followings.

LYDIA GREENE: They quickly, like, pile on and give you so many reasons not to vaccinate. Like, you're poisoning your kid. Why would you poison your kid?

AUBREY: Now, it's easy to say, like, what's up here? I mean, what is the root of this distrust? Why would parents, you know, trust social media influencers over their own doctors?

MARTÍNEZ: Yeah. So I mean, how do parents get pulled into the web of misinformation?

AUBREY: I think it often starts very innocently. New parents are looking for support, for camaraderie. When Lydia Greene's first child was born years ago, she found a site called mothering.com where moms would share information about breastfeeding, getting your baby to sleep. She says she was very grateful to find a group of moms to bond with.

GREENE: When I first joined Mothering, it was more liberal, educated hippy, granola moms just wanting to do the best for their children.

AUBREY: And part of what connects these moms is a sense that traditional doctors weren't really supporting them. When Lydia Greene had trouble breastfeeding, the doctor said, oh, you know, don't worry - there's formula. This created a seed of distrust with establishment or mainstream medicine. And it gave an opening to alternative approaches, which Greene liked at first. But then she saw that the natural parenting world was a gateway to the anti-vaccine world. And she says it was almost cult-like, where anti-vaccine leaders kind of lured you in with books and seminars and natural products.

GREENE: When you're in there, you believe that they're an underdog. They're sacrificing their career and their reputation to tell the truth about vaccines.

AUBREY: When really, she says, it's all very misleading. And she distanced herself. She got her own children vaccinated and she got vaccinated. She said she saw how COVID really provided an opening for anti-vaccine platforms to expand. You know, influencers were looking to grow their networks. She says natural parenting and kind of yoga or spiritual awakening influencers increasingly merged their networks with those of conspiracy theorists and groups opposed to government mandates, you know, uniting people who originally had very different reasons for opposing vaccines.

GREENE: So a lot of these yoga, granola, spiritual awakening people have now gone full conspiracy, QAnon. And it's like, wow. Oh, wow.

AUBREY: Her disbelief and her recognition of just how dangerous it is to steer people away from vaccines led her to form a support group. It's called Back to the VAX. It provides kind of a community and support for people who have fallen for anti-vaccine propaganda.

MARTÍNEZ: So it sounds like she's trying to help other parents kind of see through the misinformation.

AUBREY: That's right. And this comes at a time when pediatricians worry that the anti-vaccine sentiment is growing in certain circles. The most recent CDC data shows the number of kindergartners who don't have basic vaccines when they enter school has fallen slightly. So this worries pediatricians. And doctors and advocates, including Lydia Greene, say there's a lot more work to be done here.

MARTÍNEZ: That's NPR's Allison Aubrey. Allison, thanks a lot.

AUBREY: Thank you, A.

(SOUNDBITE OF LYMBYC SYSTYM'S "1000 ARMS")

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