HEALTH LIT

Health Literacy Incubator
Module 1: Understanding Disinformation & Health Literacy

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MODULE 1
Understanding Disinformation & Health Literacy

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1. Introduction

Every day, young people are surrounded by an enormous amount of information. They scroll through videos, posts, headlines, comments, stories, ads, and messages almost constantly. Health advice appears everywhere online — on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, blogs, forums, and in conversations with friends or influencers. Some of this information can be useful and empowering. Some of it, however, can be confusing, misleading, biased, or completely false.
Because so much content competes for attention, it is not always easy to tell what is trustworthy. Online platforms are designed to keep users engaged, often showing emotional, surprising, or repetitive content rather than the most accurate information. This can make false claims spread quickly, especially when they sound simple, dramatic, or convincing.
That is why media literacy and health literacy matter:

- Media literacy helps question what is seen online, understand how content is created and shared, and recognise manipulation, bias, and disinformation.
- Health literacy helps find, understand, and use reliable health information to make informed decisions about personal wellbeing.

Learning how to navigate online spaces smartly is an essential life skill — one that helps in protecting oneself and others, making informed choices, and thinking critically before believing or sharing health-related content.

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2. Learning Outcomes

After completing this module, you will be able to:

1. Understand why the digital world can make health information both accessible and confusing;
2. Explain why media literacy and health literacy are important in everyday life;
3. Distinguish between trustworthy information and misleading or false content;
4. Identify common warning signs of online disinformation and misinformation;
5. Reflect on how social media, algorithms, and online trends influence what you see and believe;
6. Apply critical thinking skills when searching for, using, and sharing health information online.

3. How to Assess Online Information

Every day we encounter health advice online, from influencers, friends, advertisements, or random posts. Some of it can be helpful, but some can be misleading or even harmful. Making decisions based on false information can affect not just your own health, but also the wellbeing of the people around you. The challenge is that not all information online is checked or verified before it is shared. Content that is simple, emotional, or surprising often spreads faster than accurate information, meaning that what appears most frequently in your feed is not necessarily what is most reliable.

Example: *"Drink this every morning to detox your body and lose weight fast."* A video with thousands of likes and enthusiastic comments looks popular and convincing — but popularity is not the same as accuracy. **Ask yourself:** would you trust this advice if it came from a random person on the street?

Before acting on any health claim, consider the following three questions.

3.1 Who created the information?

The origin of health content matters enormously. Trustworthy health information is most likely to come from:

- health professionals
- universities
- public health organisations
- peer-reviewed scientific journals

When content has no clearly identified author or institution, that absence is itself a warning sign. Anonymous posts, unnamed "experts," or vague references to "researchers say" should all prompt additional scrutiny.

3.2 Is the information supported by evidence?

Reliable health information typically references scientific research, cites credible sources, and explains its evidence clearly. When none of these are present, caution is warranted. Claims that sound too good to be true, such as instant cures or miracle results, are almost always unsupported by rigorous evidence. The absence of sources is not simply an oversight; it often indicates that no credible evidence exists to cite.

Be cautious if:

- no sources are provided
- claims sound too good to be true
- the content asserts conclusions without explaining how they were reached

3.3 Is the information up to date?

Health recommendations change as new research emerges. What was considered best practice five years ago may since have been revised, updated, or even reversed. Always check the publication date of any health information you encounter, and look for indications that it has been reviewed or updated recently. Outdated guidance presented without a date stamp can mislead people into following advice that no longer reflects current scientific understanding.

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4. Red Flags of Fake Health Content

Misleading health information is everywhere online, and it can look highly convincing. It is often designed specifically to grab attention by using strong emotions, simple promises, or shocking claims — content engineered to make people stop scrolling and share without thinking.

Example: *"I got this body in 2 weeks with this simple routine: no diet, no struggle."* Professionally edited photos accompany the post. Thousands of comments say "I need this!"
Ask yourself: are you seeing the full reality, or a filtered and edited version of it?

Certain warning signs consistently indicate misleading or false health information. Learning to recognise them is one of the most practical media literacy skills available.

4.1 Miracle cures or instant results

Claims that promise dramatic outcomes with little or no effort are a reliable indicator of unverified content. Phrases such as "Lose 10 kg in one week without dieting" or "Cure diabetes naturally in 30 days" contradict how human biology works and are almost never supported by scientific evidence. Genuine health improvements require time, consistency, and individual variation.

4.2 Emotional or dramatic language

Phrases designed to provoke fear, outrage, or urgency — such as "Doctors don't want you to know this secret!" or "The cure they are hiding from you" — are manipulation techniques. Legitimate health communication does not need to rely on manufactured alarm to make its point. When content's primary effect is to make you feel anxious, angry, or afraid, that emotional charge should prompt scepticism rather than immediate sharing.

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4.3 Lack of credible sources

Any health claim that provides no references to studies, no expert opinions, and no named institutions should be treated with caution. The absence of sources is not simply an oversight; credible health information is always traceable back to evidence. If a post or video cannot tell you where its information comes from, there is no basis for trusting it.

4.4 Conspiracy claims

Content framed around the idea that scientists, governments, or pharmaceutical companies are hiding important health truths exploits distrust in institutions to bypass critical evaluation. Conspiracy framing is used precisely because it makes counter-evidence appear to be part of the cover-up, making the claim feel impossible to disprove. This is a structural feature of disinformation, not a feature of genuine scientific controversy.

4.5 Commercial motivation

When health advice is accompanied by a product to purchase, a supplement to buy, or a programme to enrol in, the financial interest of the content creator must be considered. This does not automatically make the advice wrong, but it does mean the creator has an incentive that may not align with your health interests. Commercially motivated content should be held to a higher standard of evidence, not a lower one.

The table below summarises the five warning signs at a glance.

Warning sign	What it looks like
Miracle cures or instant results	*"Lose 10 kg in one week without dieting."*
Emotional or dramatic language	*"Doctors don't want you to know this secret!"*
Lack of credible sources	*No references, no experts, no named institutions.*
Conspiracy claims	*"Scientists are hiding the truth."*
Commercial motivation	*Health "advice" that is really a product promotion.*

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5. How Algorithms Shape What We See

What you see online is not random. Social media platforms use algorithmic curation — automated systems that analyse your behaviour and decide which content to show you — to keep you engaged for as long as possible. These systems track:

- what you watch, like, comment on, and share
- which accounts you follow and interact with most frequently
- which videos you watch until the end
- which topics you search for or click on

Based on this data, the platform continuously predicts what you are most likely to engage with and fills your feed accordingly. The result is a personalised feed, but also a filtered reality. You are not seeing a balanced range of perspectives — only what the algorithm predicts will hold your attention. Because these systems prioritise content that receives strong reactions, triggers emotional responses such as surprise, fear, or anger, and resembles what you have previously engaged with, the content that appears most often in your feed is not necessarily the most accurate, diverse, or representative of reality.

The implications for health information and body image are significant. Consider a young person who watches a few videos about fitness and weight loss. Very quickly, their feed may fill with influencers showing "perfect" bodies, strict diets, and dramatic transformation videos. Repeated exposure can make these standards feel normal and achievable, even when they are unrealistic, digitally edited, or potentially harmful. They may begin comparing themselves unfavourably, feel pressure to match what they see, or try extreme diets based on content that was never medically reviewed.

This dynamic creates several compounding problems:

- It creates an information bubble in which one type of content, one body ideal, and one lifestyle narrative dominates while more realistic or evidence-based perspectives simply do not appear.
- It can distort what feels "normal," since repeated exposure to extreme or edited standards tends to shift perceptions of what is typical or desirable.
- It affects how people feel about themselves, with constant comparison linked to lower self-esteem and unhealthy habits.
- It can directly influence health decisions, from dieting and exercise choices to mental health and risk-taking behaviours.

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- Even if the content being shown is misleading, the platform may continue showing it because it generates engagement.

Understanding algorithmic curation and echo chambers — the phenomenon by which exposure to like-minded perspectives reinforces rather than challenges existing beliefs — is an important part of digital health literacy.

Critical question: If your feed shows the same type of bodies and lifestyles again and again, does that reflect reality — or simply what the algorithm has chosen to show you?

6. AI and Health Information: What You Should Know

Today, not all online content is created by real people, and not all health advice comes from real experts. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can:

- generate images, videos, and stories that look authentic
- write convincing posts or recommendations
- answer questions about health, symptoms, or treatments in language that sounds authoritative and clear

This makes it increasingly difficult to know what is real, what is accurate, and what is safe to follow.

The important thing to understand about AI-generated health advice is that AI does not truly understand your health situation. It works by identifying patterns in large amounts of text, not by applying personalised medical knowledge. As a result, it can give incomplete, incorrect, or oversimplified advice; and because that advice is usually presented confidently and in fluent, well-structured language, it can feel more reliable than it actually is.

Example: someone feels unwell and asks an AI tool for help. The answer sounds clear and certain. But it may not be accurate, complete, or safe for that person's specific situation.
Ask yourself: would you trust the same advice from someone who has never met you and knows nothing about your medical history?

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The problems introduced by AI in the health information space include the following:

- **False confidence:** the certainty of tone does not reflect the certainty of the underlying information.
- **Not personalised:** AI does not know your medical history, risk factors, or the full context of your situation.
- **Risk of self-diagnosis:** people may follow AI advice without consulting a professional, leading to wrong decisions.
- **Misleading content:** AI can create fake images, fabricated testimonials, and invented "success stories" that build false trust.
- **Oversimplification:** AI can reduce genuinely complex health issues to simple answers that require expert evaluation.

Because content can now be both created by AI and recommended by algorithmic systems, critical thinking is more important than ever. This means questioning advice even when it sounds confident, recognising the limits of AI tools, and knowing when to seek guidance from a qualified health professional. AI can support a search for information, but it should not replace real medical care.

7. Health Topics Online: Think Critically

Social media regularly features content about health, lifestyle, and wellbeing. Some of it aims to educate, but much of it contains misleading advice, unrealistic expectations, or outright harmful messages. Understanding how misinformation manifests across the specific health topics most relevant to young people helps build the ability to recognise when information is oversimplified, exaggerated, or inaccurate.

7.1 Sexual Health

Social media sometimes spreads myths about sexual health, relationships, and contraception. Because sexual health is a topic where embarrassment or stigma can discourage people from seeking professional advice, false information in this area can have serious consequences.

Be cautious of posts that:

- promote unsafe practices
- spread misinformation about contraception or sexually transmitted infections
- claim "natural cures" for medical conditions that require professional treatment

Reliable sexual health information should always come from medical professionals or trusted health organisations, not from anonymous posts or influencer content.

7.2 Peer Pressure and Addictions

Online communities can normalise harmful habits such as vaping, alcohol misuse, or recreational drug use. Social media rarely shows the real consequences of addiction such as the dependency, the health damage, or the social and psychological impact.

Social media can create pressure to:

- try substances simply because they appear popular
- view addictive behaviours as harmless
- underestimate long-term health risks

Recognising this selective representation is an important part of evaluating content in this area critically.

7.3 Mental Health

Mental health awareness online can be genuinely helpful when it reduces stigma, encourages people to seek support, and shares accurate information about common experiences. However, some content does real harm.

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Be cautious of content that:

- encourages self-diagnosis based on short videos or quizzes
- promises instant cures for anxiety or depression
- spreads stigma or misinformation about mental health conditions

Mental health conditions are medically defined, individually experienced, and require assessment by qualified professionals. Mental health support should come from qualified professionals and trusted sources.

7.4 Nutrition and Body Image

Among the most prevalent categories of misleading health content online is that related to nutrition, diet, and body image. This content is often commercially motivated — linked to products, supplements, or paid programmes — and is frequently spread by influencers whose income depends on engagement rather than accuracy.

Watch out for:

- extreme diet trends or quick weight-loss promises
- body ideals created through heavy editing and filters
- advice that ignores individual health needs and diversity of body types

Healthy approaches to nutrition and body image focus on balance, wellbeing, and self-acceptance, not on conformity to digitally manufactured standards.

8. Checklist: Before I Share

Use the following questions every time you consider sharing health information online. Taking a moment to work through them can prevent the spread of misleading or harmful content.

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1. **Who created this content? Is the source credible, identifiable, and independent?**
2. **Are scientific studies or expert sources mentioned and referenced clearly?**
3. **Does the claim sound realistic, or does it promise results that seem too good to be true?**
4. **Is the information recent? Has it been updated in line with current guidance?**
5. **Is someone trying to sell a product, supplement, or programme through this content?**
6. **Does the post use emotional, dramatic, or alarming language designed to provoke a reaction?**
7. **Have I checked at least one other reliable source that confirms the same information?**

If you cannot answer these questions confidently, pause before sharing. Searching for a second credible source takes very little time and can prevent significant harm.

9. Progress Card and Punch Card Tools

To support your learning journey, this module includes two practical tools: the Health Literacy Progress Card and the Healthy Lifestyle Punch Card. These tools help turn knowledge into action by encouraging reflection and the development of small, consistent habits over time.

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9.1 Health Literacy Progress Card

The Health Literacy Progress Card helps you reflect on how your understanding of digital health information develops as you work through the module. During the Skills Lab, you will review several key abilities, including understanding health and media terminology, identifying reliable versus misleading sources, and thinking critically before sharing health information.
For each skill, you will assess your current level using the four stages below.

Noob	You are encountering this concept for the first time.
Aware	You understand the concept and can recognise examples.
Skilled	You can apply the concept in real situations.
Achiever	You apply this skill consistently and can explain it to others.

These levels represent your progress from learning the basics to confidently applying skills in real-life situations. Returning to the Progress Card at the end of the module and again after the Skills Lab will give you a clear picture of how your capabilities have developed.

9.2 Health Literacy Progress Card

Health literacy is not only about understanding information, it is also about making healthy choices in everyday life. The Healthy Lifestyle Punch Card encourages you to practise small health-supporting habits across several areas of wellbeing:

- mental health
- nutrition and body image
- digital wellbeing
- peer influence and addiction awareness
- physical activity

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Each day, you can complete one or more simple habits. For example, taking a screen break, verifying a health claim you encountered online, drinking enough water, or having a conversation about something that is worrying you. When you complete a habit, you mark a circle on the card. Over 14 days, these small actions build a visible record of positive choices and help embed health-conscious behaviour as part of your daily routine.

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