

Universal health information is essential for universal health coverage

Danielle Muscat,¹ Rachael Hinton,² Don Nutbeam,^{1,1} Erin Kenney,³
Shyama Kuruvilla ,³ Zsuzsanna Jakab³

To cite: Muscat D, Hinton R, Nutbeam D, *et al.* Universal health information is essential for universal health coverage. *Fam Med Com Health* 2023;**11**:e002090. doi:10.1136/fmch-2022-002090

ABSTRACT

Universal access to health information is a human right and essential to achieving universal health coverage and the other health-related targets of the sustainable development goals. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of trustworthy sources of health information that are accessible to all people, easily understood and acted on. WHO has developed *Your life, your health: Tips and information for health and wellbeing*, as a new digital resource for the general public which makes trustworthy health information understandable, accessible and actionable. It provides basic information on important topics, skills and rights related to health and well-being. For those who want to learn more, in-depth information can be accessed through links to WHO videos, infographics and fact sheets. Towards ensuring access to universal health information, this resource was developed using a structured method to: (1) synthesise evidence-based guidance, prioritising public-oriented content, including related rights and skills; (2) develop messages and graphics to be accessible, understandable and actionable for all people based on health literacy principles; (3) engage with experts and other stakeholders to refine messages and message delivery; (4) build a digital resource and test content to obtain feedback from a range of potential users and (5) adapt and co-develop the resource based on feedback and new evidence going forward. As with all WHO global information resources, *Your life, your health* can be adapted to different contexts. We invite feedback on how the resource can be used, refined and further co-developed to meet people's health information needs.

UNIVERSAL HEALTH INFORMATION IS ESSENTIAL FOR UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE

Universal access to health information is a human right and is essential to achieving universal health coverage (UHC) and the other health-related targets of the sustainable development goals (SDGs).^{1,2} The COVID-19 pandemic has further demonstrated the importance of access to relevant and trustworthy health information to enable people to make decisions that protect their health and well-being.³

In the digital age, hundreds of thousands of websites exist that are publicly available, providing health information, advice and opinion. It is access to trustworthy,

understandable and actionable information that remains the challenge. The same digital technologies that make it possible to find quality and easy to understand health information also provide unfiltered access to information and opinion that is inaccurate, sometimes deliberately misleading, and often driven by special interests. This challenge has become more obvious throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus' declaration that 'we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic' was recognised by the World Health Assembly in May 2020, when WHO Member States passed a Resolution calling on Member States and international organisations to take measures to counter misinformation and disinformation.⁴ WHO has since developed a competency framework for health authorities and institutions to manage infodemics,⁵ recognising that messages have to be relevant to people according to local context, requiring 'the creation and dissemination of trusted information so that it is not excessive, overwhelming or confusing'.⁶

Such a call is not new; in 2020, the BMJ and the Healthcare Information for All (HIFA) movement called for improved access to timely and accurate healthcare information that met the health literacy levels, language and/or cultural preferences of the intended recipients.⁷ Credible, trustworthy providers of health information, including and especially the WHO and government health agencies, have a mandate to provide health information for the public good, and need to establish themselves in a very crowded and competitive information environment.

This has not always resulted in the intended outcomes. Even when information is provided from a trustworthy source there is a significant body of research indicating that the majority of information from these sources does not meet established standards for health literacy and the public communication of science



© World Health Organization 2023. Licensee BMJ.

¹The University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

²RHedit, Geneva, Switzerland

³World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland

Correspondence to

Dr Shyama Kuruvilla;
KURUVILLAS@WHO.INT

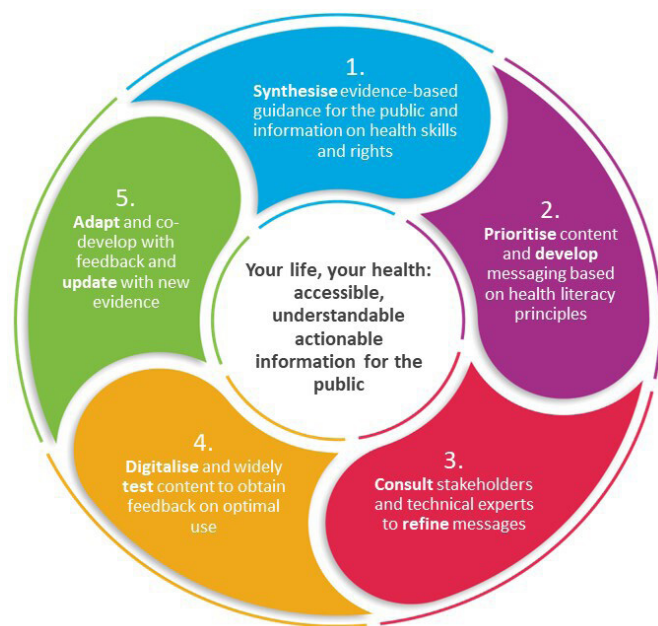


Figure 1 Five-step process to develop *Your life, your health: Tips and information for health and well-being*.

and risk.⁸ Health information is routinely hard to understand—written at a level of comprehension beyond what is recommended for the majority of people, and too often fails to provide advice in a form that is actionable for the public.

To address this gap, and building on experience gained through the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO has for the first time developed an integrated digital resource providing information on health and well-being for the public. WHO's *Your life, your health: Tips and information on health and wellbeing*⁹ is intended for use by the public (referring here to the general public as lay users rather than to health technical or policy specialists), anywhere in the world who are engaged in managing their own health and/or that of their families and communities. The resource is based on established WHO technical guidance and reflects WHO's commitment to using digital technologies to enable all people to access vital health information for their health and well-being throughout the life course.¹⁰ It is also aligned with SDG monitoring indicators related to public access to information, learning and skills development, such as SDG target 4.7 that by 2030 all learners will acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including sustainable lifestyles, human rights and gender equality.¹¹

Your life, your health was developed using a structured method, summarised in figure 1: (1) synthesising existing WHO technical guidance, prioritising public-oriented guidance within global strategies, and related points in national health and health literacy plans and international human rights frameworks; (2) developing messages and graphics to be accessible, understandable and actionable for the public through the application of health literacy principles; (3) engaging with experts and other

stakeholders to refine messages and message delivery; (4) building a website and testing content to obtain feedback from a range of potential users and (5) adapting and co-developing the resource based on feedback and new evidence going forward.

Your life, your health not only provides essential health information 'By Life Phase', but has also been developed to help people build more critical health literacy skills by promoting awareness of the broader determinants of health, including rights related to health.¹² The section on 'Finding and using information' includes advice on how to ask questions of health workers and the critical use of digital media to obtain information. The section 'A Healthy World' section reflects the ambitions of the SDGs, and the different roles that individuals, frontline workers, governments, businesses, the media and others play in promoting and protecting health. A section on 'Know your rights' includes advice on human rights as they relate across life phases, as well as people's rights to health, to information, and to be heard. In bringing this information together in an integrated resource, *Your life, your health* enables individuals to better understand the expectations they might reasonably have of their government in protecting health. In this way, the resource seeks to support people to move beyond simply obtaining and following health information, to gaining a greater sense of control over their health.

Your life, your health was developed using health literacy principles to make WHO's technical advice more accessible, understandable and actionable. It is based on a 'universal precautions' approach that assumes that all patients, consumers and caregivers will have some difficulties in comprehending health information.¹³ Health information that is universally accessible is presented first and then further detail can be obtained by following a link to WHO infographics and factsheets. This reflects the 'progressive disclosure' technique used more widely in information and communication technologies to make applications easier to learn and less error-prone.¹⁴ Related research has shown that those capable of understanding complex information prefer more straightforward health information¹⁵ and then have the option to access more detailed technical information as needed.

Similar to other information resources on the WHO website, our goal now is for the resource to be locally adapted for use in different communication contexts and campaigns as a form of co-development to meet the social and cultural preferences of different audiences, including preferred communication channels and spoken language. As part of the iterative co-development, we intend to test its use both with the general public and health workers who may also use the resource as an aid to communication across various settings, including low and high resource and urban and rural.

CONCLUSION

Improving access to relevant health information is a decades old challenge, however, COVID-19 provides a stark reminder of why the public needs access to trustworthy, evidence-based health information so they can actively participate in decisions about their health. With this new resource WHO builds on past experience and the latest evidence to communicate information to the general public in a format that is accessible, understandable and actionable. *Your life, your health* is intended to be adapted for local use to meet diverse needs.

In developing this resource, WHO seeks to communicate respectfully and directly to the public, delivering clear messages in a form that provides access to universal health information for all people. The tiered structure of the resource enables users to access more detailed and technical information and links to other sources. *Your life, your health* is a practical response to the provision of universal health information called for by the BMJ and the HIFA prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It recognises that universal access to health information is a human right and is essential to achieving UHC as well as the other health-related targets of the SDGs.

As with all WHO global information resources, *Your life, your health* can be translated and adapted to different contexts. With this paper we invite feedback and look forward to learning how the resource can be used, refined and further co-developed to meet people's health information needs, including feedback related to tailoring and adding content and adaptations for different settings and user groups.

Contributors All co-authors contributed to the conceptualisation and finalisation of this BMJ analysis article. *Your life, your health* was developed as a WHO global public health good. SK led the development of the *Your life, your health* resource, with DN and DM providing health literacy expertise and substantive inputs, RH providing technical support and coordination, and EK and ZJ providing specific inputs and overall guidance. DM is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and Westmead Lead of the Sydney Health Literacy Lab. RH is an anthropologist and independent technical and writing consultant engaged by WHO. DN is Professor of Public Health at the Sydney School of Public Health. EK is Executive Officer in the Universal Health Care and Life Course Division (UHL) at WHO. SK (guarantor) is Senior Strategic Adviser UHL at WHO. ZJ is Executive Director a.i. UHL and Deputy Director-General of WHO. DM and RH developed the first draft of the paper, with inputs from SK and DN. RH incorporated revisions and comments on the subsequent drafts of the paper from all authors.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient and public involvement Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or dissemination plans of this research.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Open access This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution IGO License (CC BY NC 3.0 IGO), which permits use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. In any reproduction of this article there should not be any suggestion that WHO or this article endorse any specific organization or products. The use of the WHO logo is not permitted. This notice should be preserved along with the article's original URL.

ORCID iD

Shyama Kuruvilla <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0327-4467>

REFERENCES

- 1 Royston G, Pakenham-Walsh N, Zielinski C. Universal access to essential health information: accelerating progress towards universal health coverage and other SDG health targets. *BMJ Glob Health* 2020;5:e002475. 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-002475 Available: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-002475>
- 2 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights/World Health Organisation. *The Right to Health, Fact Sheet 31, United Nations, Geneva ISSN 1014-5567*. 2008.
- 3 World Health Organization. Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation [online]. 2020. Available: <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation> [Accessed 16 Nov 2022].
- 4 World Health Assembly. Seventy-third World health assembly, world Health organization, Geneva, 18-19 may 2020. resolution 73/1. World Health Organization; 2020. Available: https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA73-REC1/A73_REC1-en.pdf#page=1
- 5 WHO competency framework: Building a response workforce to manage infodemics. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2021.
- 6 An ad hoc WHO technical consultation managing the COVID-19 infodemic: call for action, 7-8 April 2020. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2020.
- 7 Pakenham-Walsh N, Godlee F. Healthcare information for all. *BMJ* 2020;368:m759. 10.1136/bmj.m759 Available: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m759>
- 8 Mishra V, Dexter JP. Comparison of readability of official public health information about covid-19 on websites of international agencies and the governments of 15 countries. *JAMA Netw Open* 2020;3:e2018033.
- 9 World Health Organization. Your life, your health: tips and information for health and well-being [online]. Available: <https://www.who.int/tools/your-life-your-health> [Accessed 16 Nov 2022].
- 10 World Health Organization. *Thirteenth general programme of work, 2019–2023: promote health, keep the world safe, serve the vulnerable*. World Health Organization, 2019. Available: <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/324775>
- 11 United Nations. *Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: General Assembly, 2017.
- 12 Nutbeam D. Health literacy as a public health goal: a challenge for contemporary health education and communication strategies into the 21st century. *Health Promot Int* 2000;15:259–67.
- 13 Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Health literacy universal precautions toolkit (online). content last reviewed September 2020. 2010. Available: <https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/improve/precautions/index.html> [Accessed 16 Nov 2022].
- 14 Nielsen Norman Group. Progressive disclosure. 2006. Available: <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/progressive-disclosure/> [Accessed 16 Nov 2022].
- 15 Nielsen Norman Group. Lower-literacy users: writing for a broad consumer audience (online). 2005. Available: <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/writing-for-lower-literacy-users/> [Accessed 16 Nov 2022].