

**BEST  
PRACTICES**

**FOR HEALTH  
COMMUNICATIONS**



**AN INTERACTIVE  
TOOLKIT**



# Toolkit overview

Organizations that use social media for health communications have two primary objectives: First, to relay important facts and change behaviors surrounding a health topic, such as reducing rates of alcohol use among teens. Second, to make content that is engaging enough to capture your target audience's attention. Health-related content needs to break through the noise and compete for attention.

This toolkit will walk you through the first objective—how to communicate about health on social media—with tips sourced from peer-reviewed articles and other industry trainings. Below, you'll find lessons and corresponding activities designed to help you apply evidence-based best practices to your own content.

## LESSON 1

Best practices for general science and health communications

## LESSON 2

Understanding and responding to trending narratives

## ACTIVITY 1

Identifying best practices

## ACTIVITY 2

Choosing the appropriate messaging approach

# Lesson 1: Best practices for general science and health communications

Social media has increasingly become people's go-to source for information. People likely aren't reading peer-reviewed journals and studying data tables in their spare time. They rely on social media to do that work for them and provide clear, timely information—both in times of panic (such as an emerging health crisis) and in everyday life. The following best practices help create trust with your audience so that they turn to your page for information about the health topics that matter most to themselves and their loved ones. Below outlines the top five tips to consider for health communications, and the following pages will dive deeper into each one.

## 5 BEST PRACTICES FOR HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS

- 1 Know your audience**
- 2 Lead with the facts and communicate the gist**
- 3 Make your content approachable**
- 4 Say what you know and what you don't know**
- 5 Respond in a timely manner**



# Know your audience

Every social media strategy begins with knowing your audience. The public is not homogenous: Different groups have different backgrounds, different levels of understanding and experience with the health topic at hand, and different ways of interacting with social media platforms. The questions below will influence what messaging you use, the type of content you create, and the platforms that are the highest priority for your organization's social media growth. People do not exist in a vacuum, so it is critical to consider your audience's attributes to know what content might resonate the most.



## QUESTIONS

to consider when thinking about your audience, or who you're talking to:

- What is their age and gender breakdown?
- What is your audience's educational background?
- Where do they live?
  - *Get specific here. Are you talking to people statewide? In a particular metropolitan area or region?*
- What do they care about? What are their interests, values, and hobbies?
- What health topics is your audience most concerned about?
- Are they already engaging with your organization? What draws your audience to interact? Are there barriers preventing engagement?
- What is their level of trust? Do they belong to a group that has historically faced stigma related to your health topic?

## 2

## Lead with facts and communicate the gist

Take a minute to consider your own social media consumption. Most of us scroll quickly until something grabs our attention enough to make us slow down. People have short attention spans, and information about health topics—including substance use prevention—can be overwhelming, polarizing, and controversial. That’s why you need to lead with facts and communicate the gist—also known as the general essence of your message.

### Various theories from social psychology inform these best practices:

- **Anchoring bias:** The tendency for behavior to rely on a reference point or “anchor” when making decisions.
- **Serial position effect:** The tendency for the first and last items in a list to be the most memorable and the middle items to be the least memorable.

*Example: If someone knows that the legal blood alcohol content for drivers is 0.08%, they might believe that any BAC below that threshold is safe, even though any amount of alcohol consumption can cause impairment.*

*Example: If a social media post lists the most commonly misused substances among teens, people are more likely to remember the first and last substances.*

## THE TAKEAWAY:

**Say the most important facts first and don’t bury the lede.**

Communicating the gist is the idea that people may not remember the facts verbatim, but if your content is effective, they will understand the essence of what you’re saying. Topics related to substance use can be complex, such as the technical basis for calculating BAC based on factors like body weight, gender, amount of time to consume alcohol, food eaten before or while drinking, interactions with medication, and so on. But while people might not remember all of those factors, a good piece of content will teach them that BAC will vary from person to person, even if the same amount of alcohol is consumed.

## 3

## Make your content approachable

Approachable content opens up a two-way street that encourages audience members to follow your page and turn to it with questions.

### Avoid jargon or overcomplicating the message

Technical terms and concepts—like the physiological effects of opioids and how dependence happens—can feel off-putting to layperson audiences. Translate your facts into simple, easily comprehensible information. Interpret data and statistics for people rather than asking them to do so themselves.

**Translate this:** Opioids bind to receptors in the brain and affect the central nervous system.

**Into this:** Opioids are highly addictive, even if they're prescribed by a doctor.

### Watch your tone

How you approach a topic can be as important as the content of the message. Kindness, authenticity, and humility go a long way toward building trust with audiences. Social media is often an escape for people, and no one wants to be made to feel ignorant online. This practice is especially important when communicating with teens, who often report that the adults in their lives don't understand the stress that they face or what they're going through. Content should never imply that you know more than teens because that can further alienate your audience.

**Don't say this:** People who smoke marijuana are giving themselves depression.

**Say this:** Although some people consume marijuana to chill, regular use can also harm your mental health.

## Appeal to emotions, values, and priorities

Once you understand your target audience, you'll be able to appeal to their most strongly held values.



People care about different things.

## EXAMPLES

A parent might be convinced by substance use messaging that connects to their core value of keeping their child safe. A teenager might care about being seen as “cool” among friends; likewise, messaging can discuss why keeping yourself and your friends safe at a party with alcohol is socially important.

# 4

## Say what you know and what you don't know

Just as humility is important when it comes to tone, it's also crucial to explain when you don't know something. For example, if a new drug emerges, we may not have scientific data to support why it's dangerous. Health communications can actually build trust by being transparent about what we know—and don't know—and why that is. It's also important to explain what experts are doing to find the answers.

# 5

## RESPOND IN A TIMELY MANNER

Providing accurate information *before* someone is exposed to false or misleading information can help prevent false claims from gaining traction among a wider audience. For example, a trending social media post might claim that ADHD medications like Adderall or Ritalin will help students without ADHD focus for their final exams, which is not true. If health communicators are aware that this narrative is gaining traction, they can quickly step in by emphasizing that ADHD medications do not help people without diagnosed ADHD get better grades.

*Lesson 2 of this toolkit will provide an overview of media monitoring tools that can support communicators in responding quickly to trending narratives around substance use and other health topics.*

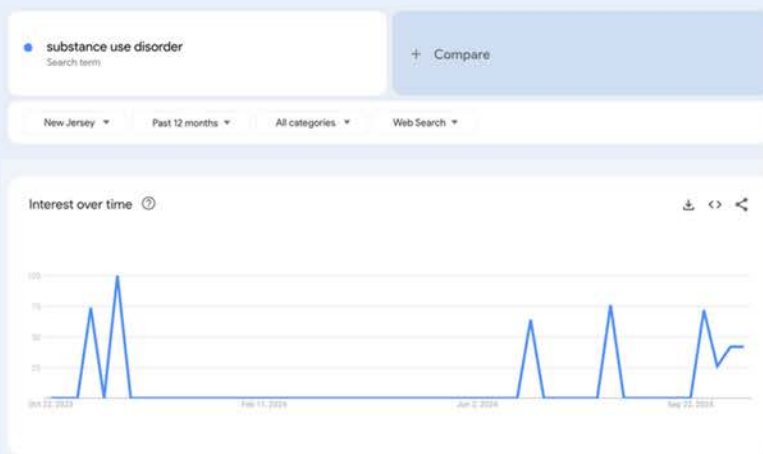


# Lesson 2: Understanding and responding to trending narratives

It can feel daunting to keep up with trending narratives related to substance use. Many people have genuine questions: For example, a college student might ask, “If cannabis is legal in New Jersey for people 21 and older, how could marijuana be dangerous?” A teen might wonder if vapes are healthier than tobacco cigarettes. A parent might have questions about whether underage drinking is really that dangerous. You know how to respond to these questions, but how do you know that they’re out there in the first place?

Media monitoring, also known as social listening, is a way to track publicly available information from social media platforms and other online sources. Google offers two tools to help with media monitoring: [Google Trends](#) and [Google Alerts](#).

## GOOGLE TRENDS AND GOOGLE ALERTS



**Google Trends** shows trending search terms and overall volume of searches. Screenshot is of Google searches of “substance use disorder” over the last 12 months (October 2023 - October 2024).

The screenshot shows the Google Alerts interface. At the top, it says "Alerts" and "Monitor the web for interesting new content". The search term "substance use disorder" is entered in the search box. Below the search box, there is a "Create Alert" button and a "Show options" dropdown menu. The "Alert preview" section shows a news article titled "Preventing, Identifying, and Treating Substance Use Disorders among Service Members - DVIDS" by Aisiya K. Kazi, MSPH. The article snippet reads: "Substance use disorders affect active duty service members' health and ability to perform their duties."

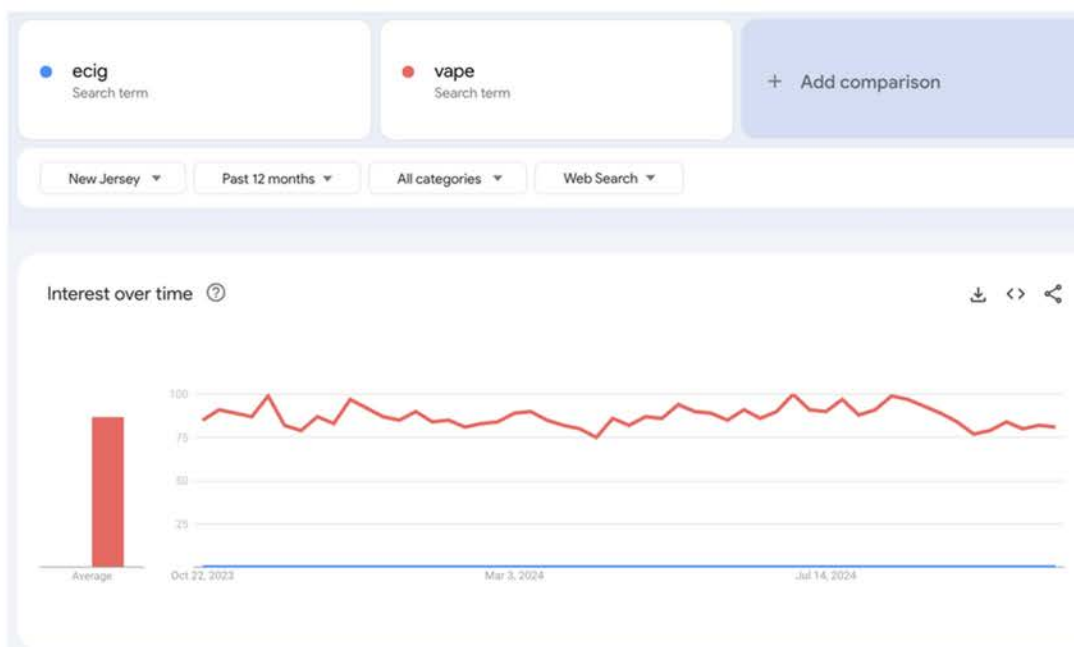
**Google Alerts** allows you to set up direct alerts to your inbox on any topic of interest. Screenshot is of a sample Google Alert for the term “substance use disorder.”

# How to use Google Trends

Google Trends offers insight into the endless array of topics that people are searching for. You can search for specific terms using the search bar at the top, and you can customize the time frame, ranging from 2004 to the past hour of Google searches. Additionally, you can see the top trending search terms of all searches to see what topics overall may be trending. The trendline offers a general overview of search volume, although it's not highly detailed, and you can't interact with it.

In order to make comparisons, you'll need to search for words one at a time. As you scroll down, you'll find "Related Topics" and "Related Queries," which provide a list of other topics or questions that people often search alongside your original term. By clicking on these related topics and queries, you can track how these interests have evolved over time.

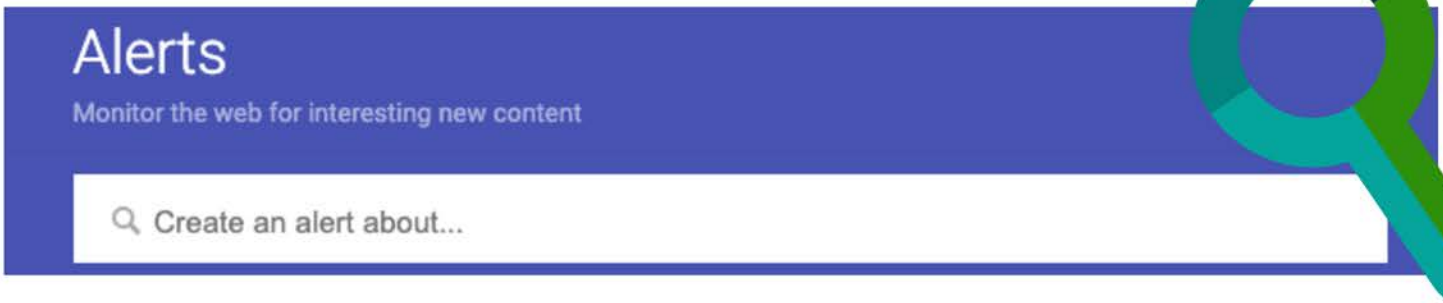
*If you're designing a campaign about vaping in New Jersey, Google Trends can help you decide whether "vape," "ecig," or an alternate term is most commonly used. While the data from Google Trends isn't highly specific, it can still be helpful.*



*Google Trends comparison of Google searches for "vape" vs. "ecig" in New Jersey over the last 12 months (October 2023 - October 2024). As shown, "vape" is the more common search term.*

# How to use Google Alerts

Google Alerts enables you to monitor online content related to specific terms. Specify particular keywords or topics of interest, and Google Alerts continuously monitors the vast expanse of online content, from news articles to websites. You'll get an email alert whenever content matching those terms is published on the web.



You can search for any term, and it's possible to include multiple terms within a single search to avoid inundating your inbox. It's crucial to click on "Show Options," as this is where you can customize the alert to best suit your needs.

## SETTINGS FOR GOOGLE ALERTS

- Specify the email frequency (How often)
- Select specific sources, like news, blogs, and web (Sources)
- Choose the desired language (Language)
- Pick a particular region or country (Region)

Once you choose the settings, the preview provided will give you an idea of the kind of information the alert will deliver to your email. For example, if you work for an organization working in vaping prevention, you can set alerts for any information about new public health data about vaping, lawsuits against vape companies, and so on.

# Responding to trending narratives

Not every trending narrative related to substance use is an example of false information: Sometimes posts go viral because they represent questions and concerns shared by many individuals. There are two main approaches for responding to trending information: 1) prebunking and 2) debunking.

1) **Prebunking** happens *before* a narrative gains widespread attention. It answers people's questions so that they know the facts before they're exposed to a false claim.

2) **Debunking** happens *after* a narrative has already gotten significant traction online. It fact-checks and refutes false claims and explains why we know the claim is false.

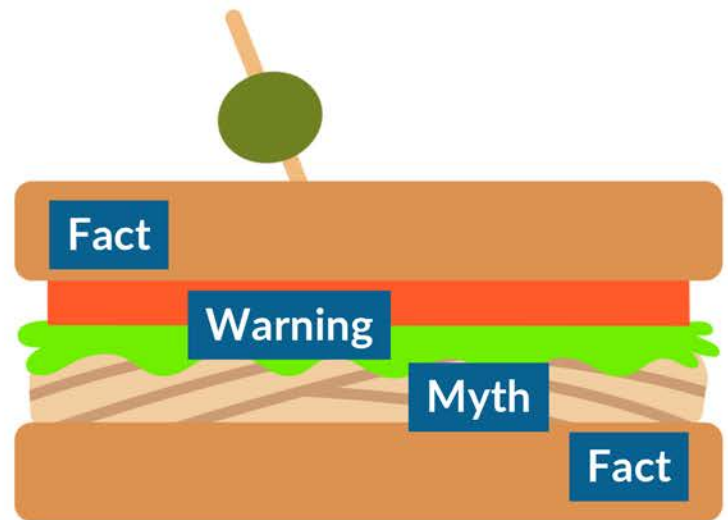
**Communication experts agree that effective debunks share certain criteria. Overall, they:**

- Provide the accurate information in a clear, concise, simple way.
- Explain why we know a false claim is incorrect.
- Focus on the fact. They **do not** repeat the false claim more than once because that can make the falsehood more memorable.
- Emphasize agreement between doctors, scientists, and health officials.

You can use a system called the “fact sandwich” or “truth sandwich” to organize a debunk. This method is effective because it sandwiches the inaccurate information in between the facts, making it more likely that the audience member will walk away understanding the fact. The fact sandwich has this layout:

1. **Begin** with the **fact**.
2. **Warn** the audience that a false claim is coming.
3. **Explain** the myth/false claim and why we know it’s false.
4. **End** with the **fact**.

When choosing between prebunking and debunking, consider how widely a narrative is spreading and how likely it is to hurt substance use prevention efforts. **You don’t need to directly respond to every false claim.**



For example, if a parent posts in a small Facebook group that prescription opioids aren’t actually addictive and that post gets only half a dozen engagements, the false—and harmful—claim won’t have much influence. This is a case where prebunking is an appropriate choice. Prebunking materials can include social media assets, fact sheets, and PSAs that stress that opioids are extremely addictive.

On the other hand, if a parent posts in a Facebook group with thousands of members that they heard it’s safe for teens to share ADHD meds and *that* post gets hundreds of comments and shares, organizations working in substance use prevention would want to employ debunking. The following page shows an expanded example of debunking this myth using a fact sandwich.

# Debunking in action

The following example shows how a fact sandwich can respond to the false claim that it's safe for people to share ADHD medications.

## Response

### FACT

ADHD medications can be really dangerous if they're not taken as prescribed. When meds like Adderall aren't used the way they were prescribed, they can cause panic attacks. It's even possible to overdose on stimulants.

### WARNING/MYTH

You might have heard that it's okay for people to share Adderall, but that's not true.

### FACT

These medications have to be prescribed by a doctor because they can be harmful for people who don't actually need them, so make sure to keep your prescription medications to yourself.

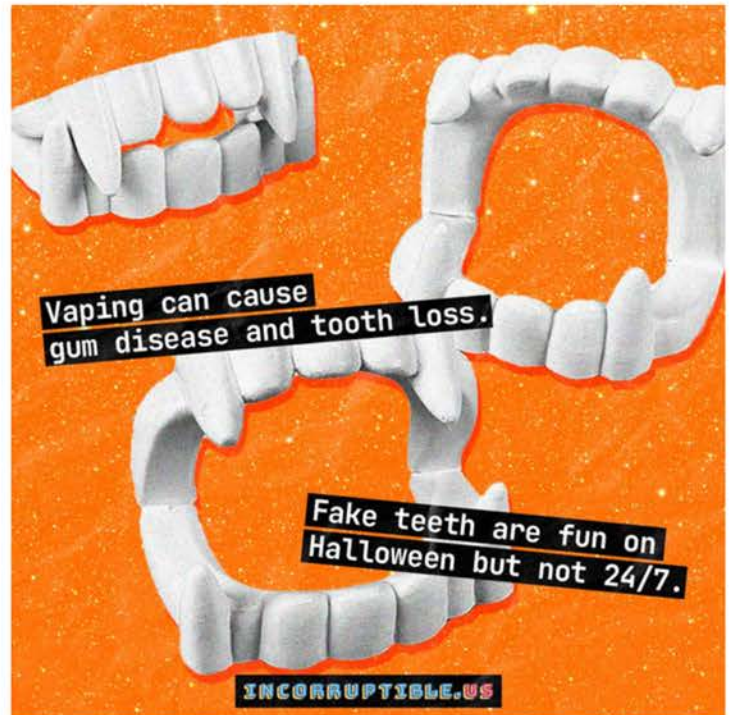
Since debunking requires you to repeat the false claim in order to explain why it's false, this method should be reserved for trending narratives that could significantly impact substance use prevention efforts. Many times, you'll use a combination of both prebunking and debunking, especially for narratives that are generating a lot of buzz.

If you're not sure whether to choose debunking or prebunking, default to prebunking. Prebunking is **always** a good choice because it simply pushes out correct information and key messaging. Proceed with caution when debunking and avoid repeating false information any more than necessary.

# Activity #1: Identifying best practices

## Example 01

This asset was created for [Incorruptible.US](https://www.incorruptible.us)'s Youth Tobacco Action Group. This asset was shared in the middle of October for both teens and youth coordinators to post on their own pages.



*Which best practices did this content follow? (Circle all that apply)*

- A. Know your audience
- B. Lead with the facts and communicate the gist
- C. Make it approachable
- D. Say what you know and what you don't
- E. Respond in a timely manner

*Why do you think this piece of content is effective? (Fill in below)*

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# Example 02

The Yale School of Public Health posted a carousel on July 3 about avoiding impaired driving. The Fourth of July holiday is associated with high rates of traffic fatalities, many caused by drunk driving. ([Link to post](#))



Which best practices did this content follow? (Circle all that apply)

- A. Know your audience
- B. Lead with the facts and communicate the gist
- C. Make it approachable
- D. Say what you know and what you don't
- E. Respond in a timely manner

Why do you think this piece of content is effective? (Fill in below)

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## Example 03

This video ([click here to watch](#)) was created for the Just Facts NJ campaign, which provided teens with accurate information about the risks of substance use and ways to stay safe. This video explained the mental health effects of marijuana.

*Which best practices did this content follow? (Circle all that apply)*

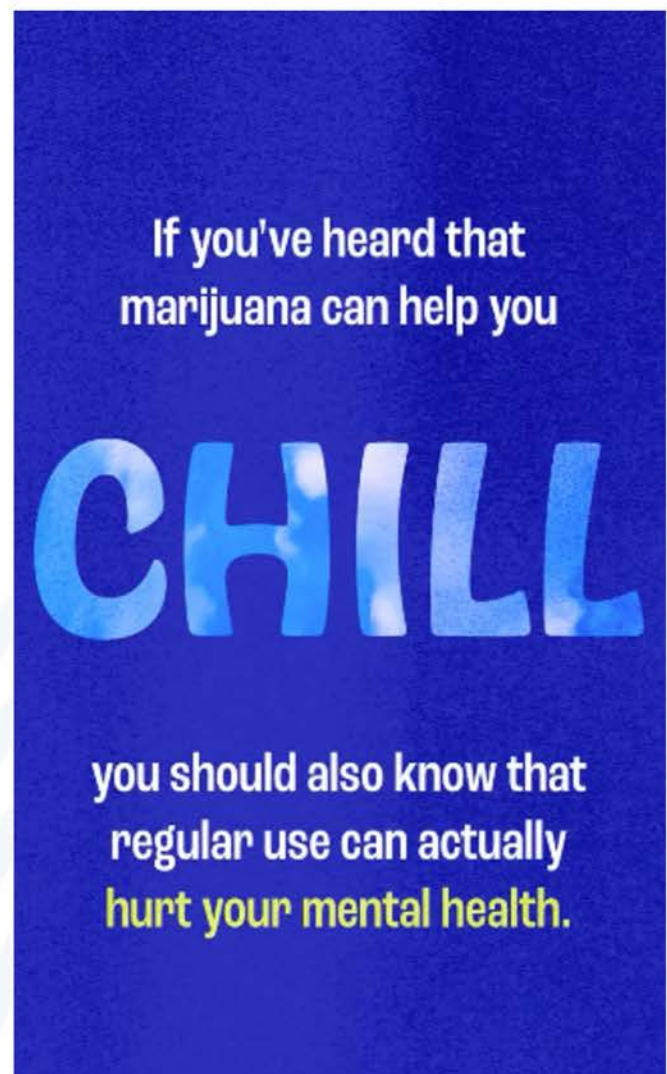
- A. Know your audience
- B. Lead with the facts and communicate the gist
- C. Make it approachable
- D. Say what you know, but also what you don't
- E. Respond in a timely manner

*Why do you think this piece of content is effective? (Fill in below)*

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## Activity #2: Choosing the appropriate messaging approach

For each of the following scenarios, choose whether you should respond with prebunking, debunking, or both.

*You can see sample responses and answers for each scenario at the end of this toolkit*

### Scenario 01

A post that's being shared all across New Jersey claims that you shouldn't administer Narcan when you suspect an overdose because if the person isn't overdosing on opioids, you could seriously hurt them. The post has gotten millions of views and has been reshared thousands of times.

*Which approach would you use to respond?*

- A. Prebunking
- B. Debunking
- C. Both

## Scenario 02

A post claims that chugging water can flush alcohol from your system and quickly lower your blood alcohol content. The post gets a handful of likes and views.

*Which approach would you use to respond?*

- A. Prebunking
- B. Debunking
- C. Both

## Scenario 03

A post from a well-known influencer claims that mixing downers like alcohol and opioids with stimulants will “balance each other out” and prevent the risk of overdose. The post has generated a lot of conversation online, including several articles from local news outlets.

*Which approach would you use to respond?*

- A. Prebunking
- B. Debunking
- C. Both

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## Activity #1: Answer key

**Example 1 answer:** A: Know your audience, B: Lead with the facts and communicate the gist, C: Make it approachable, E: Respond in a timely manner

**Explanation:** This asset leans into the fun of Halloween, and posting it in mid-October is a way to stay relevant. Also, given the size of the asset, copy is simple and to the point.

**Example 2 answer:** B: Lead with the facts and communicate the gist, C: Make it approachable, E: Respond in a timely manner

**Explanation:** Yale School of Public Health leaned into the holiday season with content around drunk driving, as these accidents increase around holidays, especially Fourth of July. Content is also fact-based and simple with short sentences to provide information in a condensed way.

**Example 3 answer:** A: Know your audience, B: Lead with the facts and communicate the gist, C. Make it approachable

**Explanation:** Assets in a vertical format are great for reels, stories, and platforms like TikTok, where youth spend time online. This format helps create content for the target audience. Since teens scroll quickly, this video is short and attention-grabbing. Additionally, leaning into topics that are important to teens, like mental health, is a way to make content approachable and applicable to them.

## Activity #2: Answer key

### Scenario 1 answer: Both

**Explanation:** A prebunking message could explain that Narcan is a lifesaving medication that everyone should carry. Substances may unknowingly be laced with fentanyl, a highly potent opioid. That's why it's always important to administer Narcan if you suspect an overdose.

A debunking message could directly refute the post by using the fact sandwich:

- **Fact:** Narcan is a lifesaving medication that quickly reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.
- **Warning/myth:** You may have heard that it's risky to administer Narcan to people who aren't overdosing on opioids, but that is not true.
- **Fact:** You should always administer Narcan if you suspect an overdose of any kind.

In this case, a combination of prebunking and debunking is appropriate because the claim has gotten widespread attention.

### Scenario 2 answer: Prebunking

**Explanation:** A prebunking message could explain that a variety of factors influence someone's blood alcohol content, such as weight, gender, food intake, hydration level, and many other individual factors.

Prebunking is the correct choice here because the claim has received very low engagement. **Remember:** Debunking should be reserved only for cases where a claim is so widespread that many audience members have already heard it.

### Scenario 3 answer: Both

**Explanation:** A prebunking message could explain that mixing different types of drugs can intensify the effect of each individual substance and lead to dangerous consequences, such as overdose.

A debunking message could utilize a fact sandwich:

- **Fact:** Mixing drugs and alcohol can be really dangerous, including for prescription medications like anxiety meds.
- **Warning/myth:** Some people think that mixing different types of drugs can “balance” each other out, but that isn’t how our bodies work.
- **Fact:** Combining substances is unpredictable and can even increase the risk of overdose.