A Community Toolkit for Addressing Health Misinformation

Information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading according to the best available evidence at the time

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General **2021**

A Note From The U.S. Surgeon General



If you're wondering whether this toolkit is for you, let me assure you that the answer is **yes.**

It's for all of us. Because health misinformation has reached nearly every corner of our society — and it poses an increasing danger to us and to our loved ones.

We all have the power to shape our information environment, but we must use that power together. This resource is here to provide a set of tools for you to understand, identify, and stop misinformation, and help others do the same. Only then will we be able to work toward a better information environment — one that empowers us to build a healthier, kinder, and more connected world.



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Surgeon General of the United States



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Summary

False or misleading information about diseases, illnesses, potential treatments and cures, vaccines, diets and cosmetic procedures are causing people to make decisions that could have dangerous consequences for their health.

This type of information can spread through communities, within families, and between friends. Often, we're trying to help — so we share information that seems helpful. But the truth is that information connected to health and medicine involves rigorous research and complex science. Advice might change as more research is undertaken, meaning even "official" advice from a few months ago might be out of date. When we rely on friends or internet searches for the best information, we might inadvertently be putting ourselves in harm's way.

Health misinformation is causing harm to individuals and to communities, but talking to one another about its impact can help slow the spread by prompting us to think twice about the information we're reading and sharing. This toolkit will help you get started.

What is health misinformation?

- It is information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading according to the best available evidence at the time.

Why are we all susceptible to being influenced by misinformation and why is it so tempting to share it?

- We like to feel that we have new information that others don't know.
- We want to protect the people we care about.
- We may be seeking explanations or wanting to share information that helps us make sense of events.
- We want to feel connected to others.

Tips for talking with your family, friends and community about misinformation

- Listen
- Empathize
- Point to credible sources
- Don't publicly shame
- Use inclusive language

HEALTH MISINFORMATION CHECKLIST

Use this checklist every time you come across health-related content you are not sure about.

- ☐ Did you check with the CDC or local public health department to see whether there is any information about the claim being made?
- ☐ Did you ask a credible health care professional such as your doctor or nurse if they have any additional information?
- ☐ Did you type the claim into a search engine to see if it has been verified by a credible source?
- ☐ Did you look at the "About Us" page on the website to see if you can trust the source?
- ☐ If you're not sure, don't share!

Welcome



When it comes to our health, having good information is crucial. False or misleading information can cause serious harm.

It might be that you've just received a worrying diagnosis and the information you find online drives you to believe that an alternative supplement or cure might be a better route than advice from your doctor. It might be that you're trying to lose weight and you end up buying pills advertised online that actually damage your health. It might be that you're not sure you should get vaccinated because you've been told, incorrectly, that the shot will cost you money.

We now live in an era of information overload. It's becoming harder to navigate the overwhelming amount of information we see every day. Not only is there more information, some of it is false or misleading. It's hard to know who or what to trust, and it requires us to learn a new set of skills.

While anyone should find the information in this toolkit useful, it is mostly designed as a resource for those who are in a position to help others learn these new skills.

Maybe you run a neighborhood page on Facebook, host a reading group, coach a softball team, run a professional association, or own a coffee shop or salon where members of your community get together. Maybe you're a faith leader, a nonprofit executive, a librarian, an educator, or a local radio host.

Whoever we are, we have people who trust us — so we all have an important role to play in addressing health misinformation and this toolkit can help us help our community.

REFLECT & DISCUSS

Do you have people who come to you for health information? Who are they? You might be a trusted messenger even if you don't know it.

Who This Toolkit Is For

Are you a health care professional or administrator who has experienced the impact of health misinformation with patients?

Are you a teacher, school administrator, or librarian who struggles to find ways to teach the fundamentals of health literacy?

Are you a faith leader who would like to engage with your congregation on the topic of health misinformation?

Are you a trusted member of your community who wants to help those around you become more empowered with health-related issues?

We've created this toolkit for you.

There are many ways to use this toolkit, but what's most important is to get started! Here are a few lessons and activities to engage your community, colleagues, family, and friends about health misinformation now.



Health Care Professionals and Administrators

Invite your colleagues to a webinar and give an overview of this toolkit. Ask them to share their best practices for talking to patients about health misinformation.

Teachers, School Administrators, and Librarians

Host after school sessions with students and teachers, facilitating workshops using the exercises provided here. Consider printing the most useful parts of the toolkit so participants can take them home. You can also hang them on your walls, doors, and community boards for reference.

Faith Leaders

Organize a meeting after service and facilitate a discussion with your congregation about the impact of health misinformation and actions you can take together. And try sharing some of the tips in the toolkit in your newsletters and on your social media channels.

Trusted Community Members

Train others to use this toolkit in their neighborhoods and communities. Get creative in how you share the content.

Access presentation slides(pdf), infographics, and other social media graphics that you can easily share with your community at **SurgeonGeneral.gov/HealthMisinformation**

What Is Health Misinformation?

Misinformation is information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading according to the best available evidence at the time. This content is often posted on the internet or shared via text messages or emails. But it's not something that only happens online. Misinformation can also come in the form of false, misleading or conspiratorial claims made in speeches, via pamphlets or posters, by news outlets, or in advertisements.

Mostly, misinformation is shared by people who do not know the claims, images or videos are false or misleading. They are sharing because they want to help people and would hate to think that they were hurting them instead.

It's common to think that misinformation doesn't impact us. But all of us are vulnerable, and all of us can help.



MISINFORMATION VS. DISINFORMATION

Misinformation

Information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading according to the best available evidence at the time*

"Misinformation can sometimes be spread intentionally to serve a malicious purpose, such as to trick people into believing something for financial gain or political advantage. This is usually called "disinformation." But many people who share misinformation aren't trying to misinform. Instead, they may be raising a concern, making sense of conflicting information, or seeking answers to honest questions."

Confronting Health Misinformation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Building a Healthy Information Environment, 2021.

*Scientific knowledge constantly evolves and that's why we're now able to treat illnesses like cancer in ways that never used to seem possible. Updating guidance and recommendations based on new evidence is an essential part of the scientific process, but when we find ourselves in new situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be difficult to know how to figure out what to believe, which sources to trust, and how to keep up with changing knowledge and guidance. That's why we need to help.

5-MIN ACTIVITY

Find These Common Types of Health Misinformation.

What types of health misinformation exist? Go online and see if you can find any of these common types of health misinformation.



As you can see, a lot of misinformation isn't completely false or 'fake', it's actually information or imagery that lacks context. Something that has a 'kernel of truth' to it is much more believable.



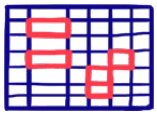
Memes (fun, colorful images or graphics) that were created as a joke, but people started re-sharing thinking it was true.



Websites that look professional (often designed to look like news sites) but the stories are all false or misleading. They have sensational headlines designed to make us click on them.



Quotations where the beginning or end have been deleted to change the meaning. The person did say that, but without the full context it's not a fair representation of what they said.



Cherry-picked statistics. Too often we see people choosing the number that supports what they want to argue, but without all the data, they haven't provided all the context.



Misleading graphs or diagrams that look official but don't tell the whole story.



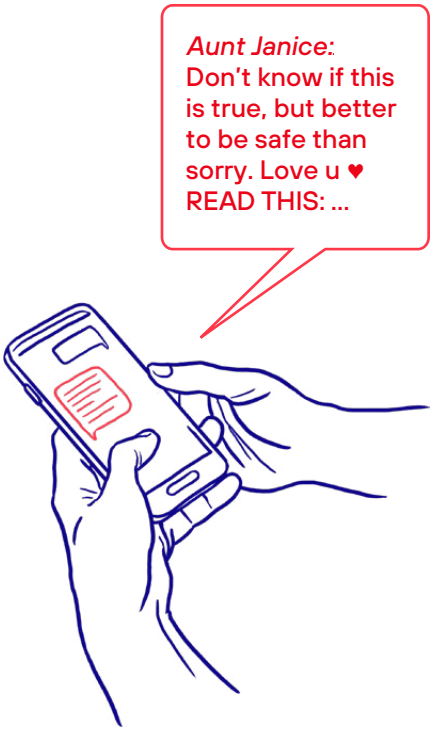
Old images that recirculate as if they are actually very recent.

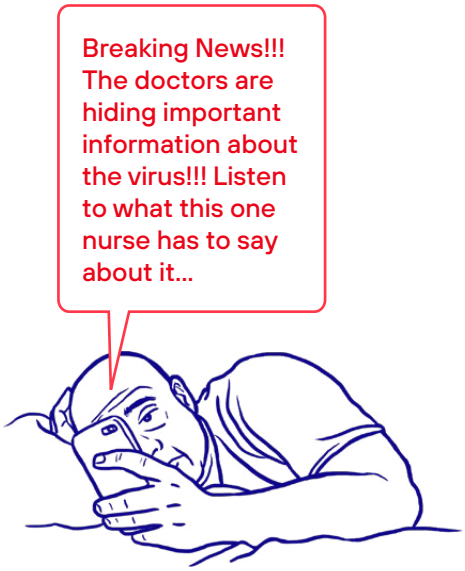


Videos that have been edited to change the meaning.

REFLECT & DISCUSS

Can you think of an example of health misinformation you've seen recently? Where did you see or hear it? Who shared it with you? Did it fit into any of the categories we've described on page 8?







Why Is It So Tempting to Share Health Misinformation?

There are a number of reasons why people unknowingly share health misinformation:

1. **We like to feel that we have new information that others don't know.** And we like to share information that others may not know yet. So when it seems like there might be a new cure or potential beauty secret, people are excited to share.

2. **We want to protect the people we care about.** Often, when people are asked about their online sharing habits, they will say things like:



I admit it. Sometimes I share things I see without checking first, but honestly, I feel that it's better to be safe than sorry.



Have you seen this video? I don't know who made it, but everything seems to make sense now!

3. **We may be seeking explanations or wanting to share information that helps us make sense of events.**

For example, during the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a great deal of misinformation. When we are unsure or frightened, we often seek and share information that can provide explanations — without checking where or who it came from.

4. We want to feel connected to others.

More of us are living alone and may feel disconnected from our local communities. But online communities are thriving, and unfortunately, some of the most active online communities are based around misinformation. We can gravitate toward other people who believe the same things we do and then increasingly feel connected to them. While a group might initially be about dieting, over time, members end up feeling like friends with other users even though they may have never met.

This feeling of connection is incredibly powerful and is one of the reasons why conspiracy communities are able to grow. People who are interviewed about their experiences frequently mention the connection they feel with others members of that community.



REFLECT & DISCUSS

Can you think of another example of harmful misinformation you've seen? If you can't think of anything, maybe scroll through your social media feeds and see what is being shared with you today. Is there anything you're not sure about?

5-MIN ACTIVITY

Understand Why People Create or Share Harmful Information.*

Which of these examples have you seen in your community?

Sometimes, we may not be able to fully understand why someone shares or creates harmful information. Their intentions can be mixed, unclear, and even change over time—they might not fit nicely into these categories. Because of this, rather than quickly jumping to conclusions or calling them out, try to listen first and engage in an open conversation.



CREATORS



"DISINFORMER" I deliberately create harmful disinformation.

"HOAXSTER" I create hoaxes to fool people, sometimes to make money.





"MISCHIEF-MAKER" I create false or misleading information to see if I can fool people for the fun of it.



"ENTHUSIAST" I post misinformation frequently in support of a person or cause.

"CASUAL SHARER" I tend to spend a lot of time online, and can sometimes share carelessly while waiting in line, or scrolling late night in bed.



"BELIEVER" I am deeply connected to an online community that is pushing false, misleading claims. I believe the information being shared by the community is true and I want to share with others.



"OVERSHARER" When I see something online that seems helpful or worrying I like to share without checking because I'd rather people have as much information as possible.



SHARERS

*The examples provided here are meant to help you understand why people share misinformation, but should not be considered fixed.

Bring These Practices to Your Communities









PRACTICE 1: EASY

What Would You Do? A Comic Strip

Read this short comic strip with your community. Find out how your loved ones can be misinformed, and how you can help. Follow up with the discussion questions provided.

PRACTICE 2: INTERMEDIATE

How to Talk About Health Misinformation With Your Family, Friends and Community

Talking to others who are sharing misinformation does not always work unless it is done in the right way. Try these tips and best practices to reach your family, friends, and community.

PRACTICE 3: DIFFICULT

Common Disinformation Tactics

What are some disinformation tactics? Encourage your community to find any of these common disinformation tactics online and discuss why they are effective.

PRACTICE 4

If You're Not Sure, Don't Share!

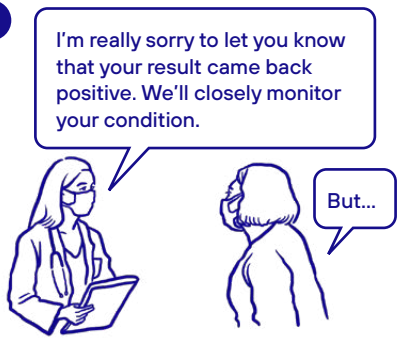
Misinformation can often be hard to detect. Try to identify the common types of misinformation in real world examples. What might you consider before sharing with others?

APPLY PRACTICE 1

What Would You Do?

Your family member is diagnosed with a serious illness. Find out how your loved ones can be misinformed and how you can help.

1



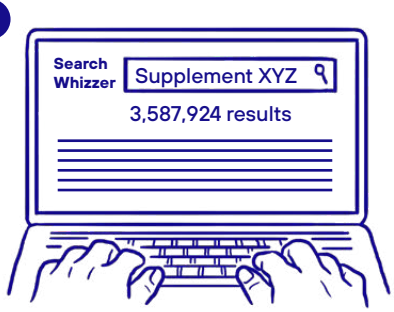
When we get a diagnosis, we are less likely to act rationally. We are often scared and desperate for anything that might help.

2



When we feel scared, we turn to people that we trust for advice. But they might not always be the best people to provide advice regarding our health. ***Pause and Ask:*** *Who do you go to for health information and why?*

3



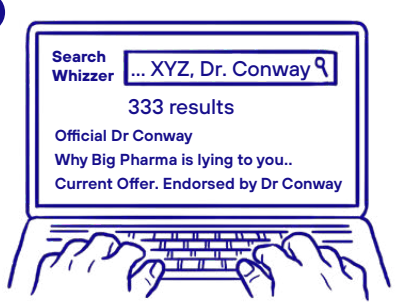
Often when we search online, we get millions of results. It's hard to know which ones to trust. ***Pause and Ask:*** *How do you verify which websites are trustworthy?*

4



When people are sharing misinformation, whether they know it or not, they'll often give you specific words to search for. By doing so, they often limit results to sites that support their point of view.

5



For example, adding a specific name will severely limit your results. ***Pause and Ask:*** *What are some red flags you have seen about health information online?*

6



7



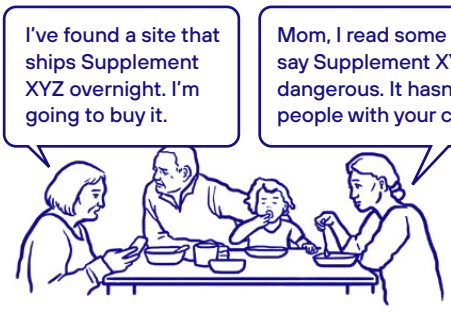
Just because someone is in a white coat or holding a stethoscope, it doesn't mean they are actually a licensed health professional. ***Pause and Ask:*** *How do you check if someone is a legitimate health professional?*

8



When we feel vulnerable, online communities can feel especially welcoming. People show that they care about you and share their own stories that are similar to yours.

9



When people are scared and hoping something will help, they may not be open to being told they are wrong. ***Pause and Ask:*** *Does this remind you of a conversation you've had?*

10



Pause and Ask: *How would you talk to your loved one about their concerns? How might you encourage them to seek professional advice before seeking treatment?*

REFLECT & DISCUSS

In this made-up scenario, Dr. Conway is not a real doctor. He decided to use fears about this illness to make money, 'inventing' a new medicine but it's really generic pills designed to lower cholesterol.

1. What is the motivation for Dr. Conway?

2. Who is he targeting?

3. Why are people susceptible?

4. What are some of the tactics used by Dr. Conway?

5. Why do people start believing it?

APPLY PRACTICE 2

How to Talk About Health Misinformation With Your Family, Friends and Community

In this section, we're going to talk about how people can talk to others who are sharing misinformation. As discussed in the previous section, simply sharing fact-checks does not always work unless it is done in the right way. Try using these tips and best practices to reach your family, friends, and community.



1. Listen

- The best way to change someone's mind about misinformation is to listen to their fears and why they believe what they do.
- Try not to focus on the content or the false claim; instead, focus on the wider issue and how they feel about that issue.
- While sometimes it can be tempting to pull out a 'fact-check' as proof someone is wrong, this approach can often shut down a conversation.

TRY THIS

Imagine your friend is worried about potential side effects from a flu shot. How might you talk to her about her fears?

- Ask her specifically what side effects she's worried about and listen to her answer. Rather than telling her she shouldn't be afraid, try to help her find trusted information that could help her make a more informed decision.
- Suggest she talks to a health professional she trusts (her doctor, nurse practitioner or pharmacist) about her specific concerns.
- Ask her to show you what she's seeing online that is worrying to her, and then searching the CDC website with her to see what the latest research is saying.

AVOID

- Sharing fact-checks from sources she doesn't know or trust.
- Minimizing her concerns, criticizing her for not having information, or telling her she's wrong.

2. Empathize

- When talking with a friend or family members, emphasize the fact that you understand that there are often reasons why people find it difficult to trust certain sources of information.
- Ask questions to understand where they are coming from.
- Admit that you have struggled and continue to struggle with knowing what is true and false.
- Where possible, talk about times when you have fallen for misinformation, and explain why you were susceptible.

TRY THIS

Imagine your uncle has just been diagnosed with a serious illness and is convinced that an obscure cure being sold online will help him. How could you talk to him about the potential harm that he could be causing?

- Talk to him about the struggles you've had figuring out what to trust in terms of health information available online.
- Talk to him about how frightened he must be by this diagnoses and that you will help him find the most trustworthy information.

AVOID

- Searching for information only to prove a point.
- Implying that you never fall for false or misleading information.



3. Point to credible sources

- Underscore that finding accurate information can be hard, especially during events like the pandemic when the information is constantly changing (which will always happen with a new virus or disease).
- Emphasize the need to find credible sources, who are not in a position to personally profit or to gain power or influence when seeking information.
- Remind them that an expert on one topic might not be the best expert to turn to around another topic.

TRY THIS

Imagine your neighbor seems to have started following conspiracy communities online and is beginning to believe increasingly outlandish claims. How might you talk to them about this?

- Ask them to share the online sources he trusts to understand where he is getting his information from.
- Discuss how hard it is to get accurate information when the research is continuously being updated, but point to sites that you think do a good job of being transparent.

AVOID

- Being judgmental about any of the sources of information used by your neighbor.
- Making assumptions that your neighbor should know where to go for accurate information.

4. Don't publicly shame

- Where possible, try to have conversations one on one, either face to face or via direct messages on social media sites. Remember, no one likes to appear wrong.
- Having conversations in the comments under a post has the potential to backfire or means more people might see the misinformation.
- A caring tone of voice could help more people. Be gentle in your replies and remember to listen and be empathetic.

TRY THIS

Imagine an old friend from your friend group from high school is sharing misinformation about a new diet. What might you do?

- Share that you wish there was an easy dieting solution but you're worried that the people selling this diet online might be doing it for profit.
- Follow up privately with your friend to say you'd love to chat about it as you're struggling to know what and who to trust online.

AVOID

- Publicly embarrassing your friend.
- Sharing any fact-checks that make fun of those who are following this diet.

5. Use inclusive language

- Where possible, use inclusive language that makes it clear that you see yourself being impacted in the same way.
- Show how you sometimes struggle to figure out whom or what to trust.

TRY THIS

Imagine you're talking to someone you often see at your local community center. They are worried about getting their new baby vaccinated. How would you talk to them about their fears?

- Use phrases such as "I understand", "I've been confused too", "it's so hard to know who to trust."
- Use phrases that include terms like 'our community', 'our families', 'we' and 'us', so the person feels that you identify with them.

AVOID

- Using phrases such as "You're just wrong. Listen to me."
- Sharing materials that poke fun at people who are vaccine hesitant.

REFLECT & DISCUSS

Have you tried to talk about health misinformation with someone you know? How did it go? What could you have done differently? Think about ways you might approach a conversation based on these techniques. How do you think it might go, remembering you can rarely change people's minds quickly?

Learn These Common Disinformation* Tactics.

Go online and see if you can find any of these common disinformation tactics. Discuss why they are effective.

*Learn more about disinformation on page 7.

We normally rely on these kinds of mental cues to quickly make sense of the world. But those who are trying to mislead us use these same cues to fool us. It's a really good idea to learn these tactics, so you can spot them and protect yourself and those you care about.





Including the logo of an established organization, like adding the CDC or a news network logo to a post



Using visual cues like someone wearing a white coat or holding a stethoscope



Creating a professional, slick looking website as our brain sees that visual cue as a "proof" of trustworthiness



Including in a post something like: "My brother works for the government and has inside knowledge. He just told me that.." or "My sister is a nurse and just called me from the ICU to tell me.."



Using unique or rare terms so that when someone searches for content connected to that term, there are fewer links and therefore it is less likely that there will be available fact-checks or debunks



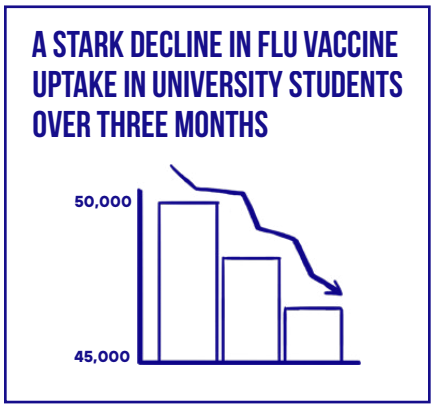
Creating content that looks like a first person experience. It's very difficult to "fact-check" someone who says, "This happened to me." Those trying to push disinformation will therefore deliberately create content that looks like real life stories from real people when it's all made up

APPLY PRACTICE 4

If You're Not Sure, Don't Share!

Misinformation can often be hard to detect. Try to identify the common types of misinformation below. What might you consider before sharing with others?

EXAMPLE A



This is a graph that misrepresents the data. Here, the numbers on the vertical axis make it appear as if there is a stark decline. If the axis started at zero, the graph would look less dramatic.

EXAMPLE B



This is an old image that is recirculating as if it's current. Here, we see an old photo of a maskless crowd from 2015 depicted as happening in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

EXAMPLE C



This is a website that looks professional (often designed to look like news sites) but the stories are all false or misleading. They are often trying to sell a product.

Now that you've seen these common types of misinformation, would you do any of the following before sharing? What else might you do?

Remember — if you're not sure, don't share!



HEALTH MISINFORMATION CHECKLIST

- ☐ Did you check with the CDC or local public health department to see whether there is any information about the claim being made?
- ☐ Did you ask a credible health care professional such as your doctor or nurse if they have any additional information?
- ☐ Did you type the claim into a search engine to see if it has been verified by a credible source?
- ☐ Did you look at the "About Us" page on the website to see if you can trust the source?
- ☐ If you're not sure, don't share!

Health Misinformation Checklist



Information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading according to the best available evidence at the time

Use this checklist every time you come across health-related content you are not sure about.

- ☑ Did you check with the CDC or local public health department to see whether there is any information about the claim being made?
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Office *of the* **U.S. Surgeon General**

Read the Health Misinformation Community Toolkit at **SurgeonGeneral.gov/HealthMisinformation**

Talk to Your Community About **Health Misinformation.**

1 What is health misinformation?

It is information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading according to the best available evidence at the time.



2 Why are we all susceptible to being influenced by misinformation and why is it so tempting to share it?



We like to feel that we have new information that others don't know.



We may be seeking explanations or wanting to share information that helps us make sense of events.



We want to protect the people we care about.



We want to feel connected to others.

3 What are some tips for talking with your family, friends and community about misinformation?

- Listen
- Empathize
- Point to Credible Sources
- Don't Publicly Shame
- Use Inclusive Language

4 What are some common types of health misinformation?



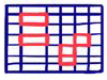
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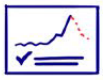
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