

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Hello, I'm Dr. Mariam Hanna and this is The Allergist, a show that separates myth from medicine, deciphering allergies and understanding the immune system. Today, we're taking a deep dive into one of the most powerful forces influencing mankind. That's right, social media.

From TikTok and Instagram to YouTube and beyond, allergy content is everywhere and it's evolving fast. Some of it's exciting and empowering, patients sharing personal journeys, success stories and tips on living confidently with allergies. But there's another side too, one filled with viral challenges, misinformation, anyone, and risky behavior that can blur the line between fact and fiction.

Over the past few years, we've seen trends like the Benadryl challenge in 2020, where misuse of common allergy meds made headlines for all the wrong reasons. And how about the DIY allergy test videos that falsely claim that you can diagnose allergies at home by rubbing food on your skin or sending your hair in the mail and presto, you have your answer. These posts can influence how patients understand their condition, when they seek help and what treatments they ask for, sometimes for better and actually sometimes not.

So how do you make sense of all of this? How do you use these platforms to educate, inspire and protect? Today we'll talk about the power and the pitfalls of social media in allergy, how to engage meaningfully with online communities, and why the allergy conversation is no longer just happening in the clinic, it's happening on your screen.

Today I'm thrilled to be joined by a Canadian social media allergy influencer who is helping shape the narrative, bringing evidence-based allergy care into the digital spotlight with clarity, credibility and heart. Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain is a Toronto-based pediatric allergist and immunologist specializing in food allergies, asthma and immune disorders. She completed medical school at the University of Ottawa, pediatrics at SickKids and a fellowship in clinical immunology and allergy with a master's in immunology from McMaster University.

Dr. Aujnarain is active on social media, handle @doctoramiirrah, using her platforms to educate the public on allergy awareness, safety and emerging therapies. Dr. A, thanks so much for joining us and welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Thank you so much Mariam

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Amiirah, this is our first time talking about this topic officially, so we're going to set the platform right. Let's start first with definitions.

What is social media and what social media is not is where I'd like to start things off, if that's okay?

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Yeah, of course. So, I mean, first of all, I think the definition of social media, what is it? And I believe in my perspective, I don't think there's like a clear definition, but for me, what it is, is you personally connecting with a platform and different platforms exist.

I think the most common ones being YouTube, Instagram, TikTok right now, and sometimes Snapchat, connecting with a presence, a following. And in that, whatever you're saying is being channeled through these different media sources. And then in general, you have a following that will either love it or hate it.

You don't really know, but at the end of the day, you're sharing your message.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

So lovers, haters, and creepers as well. You forgot to mention that @dramiirah. I want to know what drew you into this space, because to me, this seems like a terrifying space, but what drew you into social media professionally?

Why?

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Yeah, you know, I think that's a really good question. I reflect on that a lot, to be honest, whenever there's like a hater or someone that comes out. I'm like, why am I doing this to myself?

I think at the end of the day, as a pediatric allergist, I would have families come in who were nervous, anxious, because they read something conflicting online or they saw a social media post about X, Y, Z. And I started to realize, like, if I wasn't part of that digital conversation, someone else is going to be. Someone is going to be there to take that space.

And maybe they might not have the right credentials. So when I made this random reel, or like back in the day, this was TikTok, and it got 4 million views about Benadryl use, I realized that there is an opportunity and a need. And with that, I recognized, OK, I'm going to try my best to fill that gap, at least knowing I have the credentials that can back up a lot of the data that I'm saying.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

And how are you currently using social media in your role as an allergist? **So how do you use it now?**

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Yeah, I think now it's, there was a phase, I feel like everything evolves, right? You have phases in your life, and everything changes. But for me, initially, it was just a creative outlet, then it turned into, okay, I'm going to regurgitate what I learned on my exam so that I don't forget it.

And so it allowed me to be like, telling all these facts out loud, and people really resonated with that. Now how I feel like I'm using it is to my ability, my best of my ability is like, if I have a patient coming in clinic, and they say x, y, z, and it's clearly wrong, or, you know, they saw it on some person's TikTok, I make a post to kind of dispel that myth or break it down, evidence based information. And so that's one thing is just to try to break down misinformation.

And then I think the second way is to get patients to be honest with you to know more about food allergy, be more aware, knowing about, for example, food immunotherapy, that a lot, I've had a lot of patients who come to my clinic now that met me, 'met me' on Instagram or socials, and they would say, "Oh, you know what, I didn't even know this was a thing". So it's like an education and then also getting patients from that. The last thing is, you know, getting people to be involved in my life, like knowing about my wedding, and then getting pregnant, and seeing that we're human too, you know, and that, like, we're not, we're not these like doctors that sit in a white coat behind the desk, and you just come and talk for five minutes, like, this is my life, and I'm sharing it with you.

That's kind of the three ways I'd say.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Time commitment. I want to talk about how much time you devote to this. Like we all talk about, running around, being super busy, and this takes time to produce good content, to think up of the content, to upload it properly, and to do it in a manner that's engaging to the public. How much time commitment is this for you?

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

I think it depends on the week. So I try to be conscious about my life. So for example, I know I'm going to be on maternity leave and delivering a baby in a couple months, and so I'll batch.

So I would say on an average week, it's a range of like three to four hours a week. This can be in small bursts. So for example, if I have a very slow clinic day and a bunch of no-shows, I'm just like banging out content.

You know, literally just what happened that day. Like, okay, what did I see today? Oh yeah, I saw a venom allergic child.

Here's some information about venom allergies or whatever. So that will be what I usually do. And then I bank them.

And then on weeks that I'm really busy, I just try to make sure, because the important thing about social media is consistency. And if you're not consistent, then people don't know how to rely on you, right? They're like, oh, Dr. A posted once, and then she didn't post for two months. And then, you know, so I try my best to post every day, but it might be content that I made. Like I posted something recently. I made, honestly, two years ago, and someone called me out.

They're like, hey, where's your pregnancy belly?

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Aha! They're following, like, to the detail.

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

I was like, yes, you noticed that I'm not eight months pregnant.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Amiirah, how do you create boundaries? I mean, you clearly are okay with people following very closely what's happening in your personal life, but where do we draw the line? How do we create boundaries?

I guess I'm asking for others that are interested, physicians that are interested in getting into social media, but they want to know how to draw boundaries.

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Yeah, you know, this is a very good question. And I think I'm still trying to figure out what my boundary is. You know, and I think especially when you develop a family and you have children, you have to decide, like, how far does this go?

When I initially started, I was on my own. I was single. My boundaries were just social media, and I had everything I could say I would answer to myself, right?

Like, there was nobody else that was involved in that. I was also COVID, so I had lots of spare time. And then when I got married, you know, it is a conversation with my husband.

Like, what are you comfortable with me sharing on social media? Like, we went on our babymoon. How much of that are you comfortable sharing?

You know, when our child comes, how much of that are you comfortable sharing? And I think that that's a conversation, and it's constantly changing, depending on what stage of life you're at. And I think the other thing is time is another boundary you have to set for yourself, because it can be unlimited, right?

You can do five posts a day, 10 posts a day, and it can be nonstop. There was a part, a point in my life where I was, like, we would go for dinner, my husband and I, and he'd be like, okay, Instagram eats first. And I could see, I'm like, oh, you're right.

Do we just enjoy a meal? Do I ever just enjoy a meal? Like, you know, and so you have to start to reflect on that every week and see, A, what are you comfortable sharing about your life, knowing that everyone's going to know about it, and have good things and very bad things to say.

And then B, like, what is that time commitment for you? And what's the gain? And what's the value add?

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Fair enough. What's the gain and the value add? I like that.

So let's talk about gain and value add for physicians in general. There's lots of doctors now on social media. This has been an explosion.

And I often take a step back and say, like, does this make us perceived, like, positively? Or could it be perceived negatively? Like, we've lost that professionalism.

I don't see lots of lawyers on social media is what I will tell you. And there's not a lot of accountants on social media. So what's with this, like, move of doctors on social media engaging?

What's happening there?

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Yeah, it's a great question. You know, I think in general, I'm obviously a supporter, because I do it. And I think that it's nice when patients see, you know, physicians talk in plain language, they're being human, even maybe they're funny.

It kind of breaks down a barrier that sometimes I feel when I first meet a patient. And sometimes, like, I have a patient come in, and right away, they're like, oh, my gosh, I follow you. Like, how's your baby?

How's your pregnancy? And already almost creates a level of therapeutic, a therapeutic relationship, even before you've seen them, which is nice. Because then you can focus on maybe the medical aspect, because I personally don't, I'm sure if when you see patients, it's hard to like, have a patient come in, you sit down, and you're like, when did your hive start?

Right? Like it, you want to get to know the patient a little bit. I don't know, I just maybe it's just a me thing.

But I have, I just have that personality where like, I like to get to know my patient a bit and makes them more comfortable.

I do think that although overall, it has the ability to be positive for a person, it does invite criticism, there are people who are going to hate. And even if you have the most positive intentions, like someone will find something to criticize you on. So I think as long as you can, you know, like a strong thick skin, and recognize that you yourself are true to who you are, and you feel professional in what you're doing, then I think that it's a positive thing.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Wise words. So how are patients in your practice using social media when it comes to allergies?

So they're clearly following you and then coming to clinic to talk to you about things. What other ways have you found?

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

So one of my patients, it just literally happened yesterday, he had looked up a biologic called dupilumab, okay? He has eosinophilic esophagitis, and he had Googled treatments for it.

He went on TikTok and searched dupilumab, okay? Like, imagine that. And he found, I made a post about dupilumab and EOE, I don't know, a few months ago.

That's how he found it. Then he found that I was in Toronto, which he also was in, got a referral to me. And we talked about it, like one-to-one, we actually had a conversation about dupilumab.

So I think, in my opinion, people are starting to use it as a search engine. Honestly, like almost like Google, right? Because it's like a fast way to be like, okay, dupilumab is so random, right?

What post? Oh, here's one where a patient experiences had been on dupilumab. Here's a doctor who is an allergist who prescribes it.

And that's kind of amazing, in my opinion, if it's credible, which is why we have to have a presence, right? Otherwise, it's just a bunch of things that people just have opinions on.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

And it's just adjusting your mind rather than going to the Google page. They're listening to somebody have a conversation or a physician have a conversation about this drug. That's kind of intriguing.

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Yeah, it is, right? It's almost like having a mini presentation on it, right? So you could look up dupilumab and read it and go to their website and whatever.

And that's just one example. Like I have patients who were on Benadryl every single day who came to see me or like, okay, tell me about what other medications I can be on. What's better?

Why is it better? Right? Like these are just really interesting conversation.

And even if it's something as simple as they saw my post, and they're in Calgary, and they go talk to their allergist about that. I feel like I've made a difference on a huge scale, right? Like on a global scale.

Well, not global, mostly North American right now.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

It's okay, you're getting global. Just yep, yep. Global scale.

Yep.

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

One day.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Okay, so now, now, obviously, I want to talk about challenges, because you seem to be handling things well. And you've touched on this a little bit to talk about boundaries, and time commitment.

But but I'm going to ask again, like biggest personal or professional challenge for you on social media. What's the biggest struggle that you face?

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

I think the biggest struggle is, like the emotional labor. I think, and that's something that is hard to quantify what that means. But, you know, you put yourself out there as a physician, as a woman of colour, who, a minority, it means you're visible, you're vulnerable, and you know, sometimes you're a target. And so, you know, you and I have chatted about this, like I posted something that was, I thought, a good play on angioedema.

Someone was super offended about that, right? And what did that turn into? It turned into a longer chat with other families.

Oh, my gosh, did you see Dr. A posted this? How insensitive, how etc. And this is a post from four years ago, right?

That's coming out recently. And I think that's the other thing. I think that emotionally, but like, I felt horrible that someone interpreted what I was trying to say in a negative way.

And I, you know, I pulled the post, I apologized. But it still sat with me, right? And maybe some of the patients that were discussed, like they discussed with were my patients, and then they changed their perception of me because of it, right?

And so I think the more you put out there, the more vulnerable you are, the more at risk you are to being criticized as well, you might be obviously positive. And that's my hope that I can show somebody out there that, you know, look, you can be like a first generation immigrant of colour in medicine, you could be a doctor, you could be a model, you could be on social media, they're like, the limitations are the ones you put upon yourself. But on the flip side, it's like it hurts you a bit when when someone's critical of you and see something you wanted to be the most positive and the most negative way and then brings you down.

So that that target piece has been hard and the emotional labour that comes with that. And it's always, it's constant. Like one simple thing, I had mentioned once in one of my posts, I said, a 35 year old girl came into the clinic and showed me this rash and someone got upset because I said girl instead of woman, right?

So it's just there's always something. You can't be perfect.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

I come pretty close. I think you come pretty close to doing it. You have learned and refined and you continue to learn in this space.

And I think that's kind of why we look at you in this space to say like, what can we learn? How can we get into this space and and cause good for the general population and for our patients as well? So that's a perfect segue to key lessons you've learned from your time in this space.

And then we're going to get you to give us some advice to your colleagues. So let's start with key lessons. Biggest lessons you've learned from your time in this space.

What would you say?

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

I think number one is that like consistency and patience. That's the biggest thing I've learned. You know, I took a hiatus off TikTok for a period of time because, some personal issues and the follower count drops and people are less engaged because they're upset.

Or when you start off, it might take months and months and months even to start to develop a following and you get kind of self critical about that. I think you have to be patient and you should just feel like this is not an overnight game. And also recognize the number of followers you have, the number of comments and likes, that's not what makes you who you are and a valid person and have things to say that is valid.

Right? So I stick by that. I think I just keep being consistent.

I keep showing up, but I also don't take the feedback as a reflection of me, because let's say one post has two likes back in the day, that emotional labour I was talking about, like, oh, like no one liked it. I put, I spent like 10 minutes making that and no one likes it. And did I do something wrong?

And it's so easy to get into this headspace. But now I'm just like, whatever, move on. This is the next piece of information.

So that's something that I learned from, like, just keep being consistent, keep posting, be patient and be OK if, have your own metrics of what you want. Like if your goal is to share information, you shared information. Right.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

I love that. Have your own metric. I really like that.

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Yeah. Because it's not, you know, how many likes you have doesn't mean like you're cooler or like more valid.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

No, not at all. OK, Any final thoughts on the evolving role of social media and allergy and medicine in general? Are we going to see more of this space grow?

Is this a fad? Is this a trend?

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Is it a fad? Honestly, I don't I think social media is almost like no longer an optional thing. It's where public conversations are happening, whether it's with physicians or other people. I think either we can choose to participate, help shape it, or we can be drowned by less credible voices.

And so there's going to be some of us that choose to show up, whether it's in our scrubs or in our pajamas, you know, in a lab coat on our honeymoon, whatever. And there's gonna be people who don't. And regardless, though, I think if it doesn't feel right for you, then it's probably not right for you.

Just be true to yourself. If getting in front of a camera is super awkward for you, having a conversation and doing that is very hard for you, you might need to think about other outlets. Or perhaps you need to get a professional to help you and be like, okay, this is what I need you to do.

Especially if social media is part of your, like, marketing campaign or building your brand. If you want to open up a clinic. This is how people, they find you now, you know, reviews.

It's all part of this metaspaces.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Metaspaces. All right, time to wrap up and ask today's allergist, Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain, for her top three key messages to impart to patients, slash followers, and obviously physicians on today's topic, social media. Dr. A, over to you.

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Okay, so the key points I would say is, the first thing is putting yourself out there online as a doctor, it's not easy. But I think for me, staying silent while misinformation would spread, that felt worse, right? So that was a punchline, a key point for me is I couldn't just sit back.

And I think the second thing is that not everyone's going to agree with a doctor on social media. But for me, if I can reach one parent, one patient, one person who feels like safe or seen or I've changed their quality of life, that's worth it to me. And I think that was something that I've always remembered.

If I made a difference in one person's life, it's okay if there's about 10 people who were happy with me. And I think that the last thing is sometimes you'll be criticized, you know, as a physician on social media. And I think physicians in general are held at a different standard.

And you might be criticized for being too much. But like, what is too much? I think where did you draw that line?

For me, watching allergy myths go viral without pushing back, that's to me too much, right? So those are the three things that I always try to remember. And everyone's going to have their own three things.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

Perfect. Thank you, Dr. A, for joining us on today's episode of The Allergist.

Dr. Amiirah Aujnarain

Thank you.

Dr. Mariam Hanna

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Dr. Mariam Hanna

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Sincerely, The Allergist.

