

The power of collaboration in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic: Google and the World Health Organization

Google Health



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Overview

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in response to the outbreak of COVID-19.

On March 11, 2020, they characterized the outbreak as a pandemic.

In the face of this global pandemic, both public and private organizations were faced with new challenges and urgently searching for ways to help. One clear opportunity was a collaborative effort between Google and WHO to assist people as quickly and as effectively as possible.

Opportunity and Approach

The Opportunity

Google has products that reach billions of people every day. WHO leads and champions global efforts to give everyone, everywhere an equal chance to live a healthy life. **Together, to provide assistance during the pandemic, these two entities worked to increase accessibility of accurate and up-to-date health information and resources.**

The Strategic Approach

The WHO Tech Task Force, convened by their Digital Channels team, worked to foster collaboration by creating digital solutions across a range of needs. Google actively participated in the task force to coordinate efforts across numerous products, globally. In collaboration, Google and WHO worked together to get the right health information to people when they needed it most.

Mission Statements

Google Health: Help billions of people become healthier through products and services that bring connection and meaning to health information. Efforts include building products that empower people with the information they need to act on their health, developing solutions with technology that enables care teams to deliver more connected care, and exploring the use of artificial intelligence that can assist in detecting cancer, preventing blindness, and more.

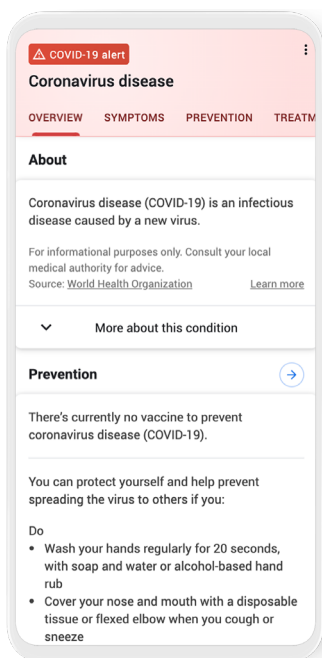
The World Health Organization: Promote health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable, by providing technical assistance to countries, setting international health standards and providing guidance on health issues, coordinating and supporting international responses to health emergencies such as disease outbreaks, and promoting and advocating for better global health.

People come to Google with health-related questions hundreds of millions of times a day

As the pandemic rapidly spread, that number soared even higher as people across the world searched for answers to questions they never saw themselves asking before.

From the [start of the pandemic](#), Google Search worked to help people find high-quality, reliable information that was relevant based on where they lived, from trusted sources in response to user needs. Here's how it was done in partnership with public health organizations like WHO:

- » [SOS Alerts](#) that included up-to-date news, resources, and information to keep them and their communities safe
- » [COVID-19 information panels](#) with the latest news, vaccine information, and more
- » Commonly asked questions about the pandemic
- » Critical public service announcements to provide users with actionable information for health and safety during the pandemic
- » Readily available mental health resources to help users cope with the mental health-related impacts of the pandemic



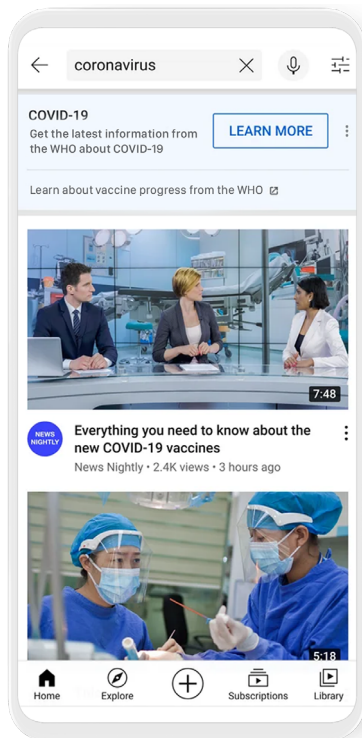
“When we have questions about our health, the internet is usually where we start our journey. That’s why, no matter what you’re searching for on Google, it’s our mission to give you timely, relevant and authoritative information, exactly when you need it.”

– Hema Budaraju, Senior Director of Social Responsibility Verticals on Google Search



In 2021, YouTube had over 110 billion views on health condition videos globally

Removing harmful misinformation while simultaneously promoting content from credible health authorities has been YouTube's primary goal since the start of the pandemic.



“YouTube has the potential to be a transformative tool for public health, to deliver important messages to communities at scale, in the format they prefer: video.”

– Dr. Garth Graham, Head of YouTube Health

This is how it was done:

- » YouTube launched policies against harmful misinformation regarding COVID-19 with input and guidance from relevant local and global organizations like WHO
- » Periodic revisions of these policies to work against the evolving threat of misinformation in this space
- » Promotion of high-quality content from sources like WHO about the virus through search results, recommendations, and features on the home page
- » **COVID-19 information panels** added to the top of search results and under videos, providing links to more contextualized information from authoritative sources
- » YouTube connected key creators with WHO experts, collaborating on a series of videos and PSAs leveraging trusted voices to amplify timely public health messaging on topics like **holiday safety**, **mental health**, and **vaccines**



Solutions

Google.org

Helping the COVID-19 effort with the largest Ad Grants donation provided by Google to a single organization to date

Ad Grants

To help WHO connect as many people as possible with authoritative information, [Google.org](#) awarded the organization more than **\$320** million in donated Google Search advertising via Ad Grants. This has been Google's largest Ad Grants donation to a single organization, helping WHO reach users across the globe, in multiple languages.

Philanthropic Grants

To help WHO track and understand the spread of the virus and help frontline workers with essential supplies and information, Google.org matched up to \$5 million in donations to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund for the World Health Organization (through the UN Foundation).

Solutions

Google Arts & Culture

Combining culture and technology to make knowledge accessible online to everyone

Mental health and wellbeing became a major impact of the pandemic as people were forced to stay in lockdown for long periods of time, often isolated from friends and loved ones. Google Arts & Culture's mission is to make the world's cultures, in all their diversity, accessible online to anyone, anywhere. The work with WHO resulted in a [toolkit](#) of art, activities, and self-care suggestions contributed by experts and creatives from around the world.

To mark this moment in time, WHO also contributed to [A Brief History of Vaccination](#) when it launched in January 2021, adding insights and a vivid story to this effort. Google Arts & Culture worked alongside WHO and other scientific institutions for [World Immunization Week](#) in 2022 to provide additional [stories](#) of life-saving vaccines.



Collection: Institut Pasteur

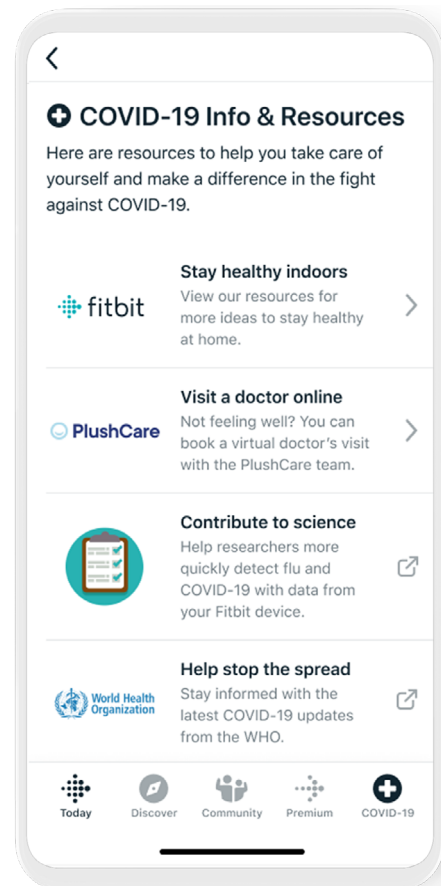
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Keeping people informed and connected on the path to improve their fitness and health

At the beginning of the pandemic, a **COVID-19 tab** was added to the Fitbit app in select countries to give people access to real-time updates from WHO. This tab provided the latest information, easy access to relevant tools and content, and allowed users in the US to connect with a doctor virtually.

Fitbit highlighted **Active Zone Minutes** in 2020 to encourage people to stay active while their routines were deeply disrupted. This metric, based on resting heart rate and age, measures time spent in the personalized heart rate zone, helping users easily see their progress toward the WHO-recommended physical activity goal (150 minutes of moderate intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity) each week.



Extending awareness of recommended handwashing guidelines

To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, WHO recommended washing your hands for 40 seconds. To expand the reach of the message, Google Fit added a **hand-wash timer** as a tile in the app and as a shortcut on WearOS smartwatches.

Impact

Google and WHO helped billions of people around the world by working together

Google Search

Billions of people have accessed COVID information through Google from over 200 countries and territories and in dozens of languages. These panels surfaced information from public health organizations like WHO, including the COVID-19 vaccine information panels that launched in 2020.

YouTube Health

Information panels have been viewed billions of times, which has made them an important source of accurate and reliable information. Collaborative improvements to the YouTube COVID-19 misinformation policy led to the removal of more than 1.5 million videos related to dangerous coronavirus misinformation, like claims of a hoax or false cures, within the first two years of the policy update.

fitbit

Fitbit has found **positive health impacts** across resting heart rate, heart rate variability, sleep, and stress management scores among users hitting the 150 Active Zone Minutes (AZMs) weekly targets set by WHO. Users who met these goals reported a noticeable improvement in their health compared to the months they didn't meet them.



The impact made by this work between WHO and Google has made one thing clear: **we are not done.**

Finding new opportunities to use our expertise is critical to public health, specifically in three areas of focus.

- » Highlighting accurate health information
- » Supporting digital transformation in low-resource settings
- » Preparing communities for future public health threats

“We can do more, go faster and solve the right problems for people and organizations when we work together. Our collaboration with WHO is an example of how we are better together and can have a meaningful and positive impact on people’s lives.”

– Dr. Karen DeSalvo, Chief Health Officer, Google



Examples of the continued collaboration between Google and WHO

Google.org

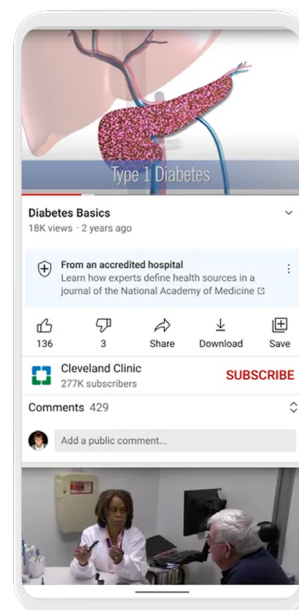
WHO has shifted how it uses Google.org's Ad Grants to public health topics beyond COVID-19, such as mental health, Mpox, flu, Ebola, and natural disasters. The organization served over 28 million public service announcements in six languages, resulting in over 2.7 million visits to their website to learn more. Google.org is providing another \$50M in Ad Grants to support WHO in continuing their impactful work in public health throughout 2023.

YouTube Health

A panel of experts was established by WHO to review a paper that defines sources of **authoritative health content**, published by the US National Academy of Medicine in 2021. This panel established **principles** for identifying trustworthy health information sources on social media, and shared how these principles could be applied in different regions based on local challenges.

The initial principles only included accredited organizations like educational institutions, hospitals, and public health departments. In 2022, YouTube worked with WHO, the National Academy of Medicine, and the Council for Medical Specialty Societies, to **expand those principles** to include individuals and organizations like doctors, nurses, and mental health professionals to elevate even more credible sources of health information.

Thanks to WHO's leadership in this initiative, YouTube was able to apply these principles to their platform and better visually distinguish credible health sources. This will help users find accurate information more easily because content from credible organizations will already be prioritized.



Continuing Collaborations

Digital health apps

Open Health Stack

Google has been collaborating with WHO to make it easier for developers to build next-generation digital health apps with the goal of making healthcare more accessible. The open-source [Android FHIR Software Developer Kit](#) (SDK) was launched to help Android developers build secure mobile solutions with the Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR) standard.

[Open Health Stack](#) extends this work as a suite of open-source components and design guidelines that make it easier for developers to build interoperable, secure digital health solutions based on the FHIR standard. Using Open Health Stack, developers can build apps more quickly for healthcare workers to empower them with the right information they need to make informed, evidence-based decisions for their patients.

fitbit.

WHO and Fitbit created a [clock face](#) for Fitbit smartwatches to launch during the FIFA World Cup with the goal of engaging more users in the new Active Zone Minutes feature. This allowed users to track their Active Zone Minutes and score goals after meeting the WHO target each day.



Conclusion

When faced with a global crisis, Google and WHO worked together quickly to share resources and collaborate on initiatives to aid the entire world by reaching people where they are, through the technology tools they use every day. This type of cooperation shines a bright light on the benefits of working together to help solve the biggest health challenge that we face as a global community.

On May 4, 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an end to the Public Health Emergency of International Concern in response to the outbreak of COVID-19.

“The work we did with Google throughout the pandemic allowed us to get critical information to so many people that needed it, in ways we couldn’t have otherwise.”

– Andy Pattison, Digital Channels Lead,
World Health Organization



