

2025 Advancing Health Storylines in Popular Entertainment

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Advancing Health Storylines in Popular Entertainment

A Toolkit for Storytellers

Millions of Americans live with chronic health conditions, and many more have family members, friends or colleagues who live with disease.¹ However, according to a [recent study](#) of popular films and television series from the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative – sponsored by Eli Lilly and Company, in line with its ongoing commitment to the health and wellbeing of patient communities and efforts to challenge misperceptions around the underrepresentation of disease– some of the most common chronic health conditions and diseases are not portrayed authentically and are underrepresented in entertainment.

Researchers have established that including health information in entertainment can lead to better informed audiences and in some cases, taking action to prevent or screen for disease.² Harnessing the power of media allows for broad dissemination of messages related to prevention, early detection and treatment, especially for diseases that affect a large portion of the population. ***Additionally, increasing the accuracy of media portrayals of health can combat mis- or disinformation, or stigmatization, that viewers might receive from other sources.***

This belief in the power of representation is not new. In fact, Dr. Stacy L. Smith, contributor to this toolkit, began her research into gender representation in film in 2007.



Photo via Marla Aufmuth/TED

Her 2016 TED Talk, [The Data Behind Hollywood's Sexism](#), sparked widespread dialogue about on-screen equity. Following years of data-driven advocacy, including her Just Add Five campaign, gender parity was reached in 2024, when over half of top-grossing films featured female leads or co-leads. Her work showcases how entertainment can be transformed through research, collaboration and creative intention.

The goal of this toolkit is to help content creators who want to tell stories about health and advance the narrative via nuanced, authentic and informative portrayals. Nearly all of us know someone – a family member, a friend, or colleague – who have been diagnosed with a chronic illness. These personal connections can be powerful starting points for storytelling. Within this toolkit, you'll find recommendations, creative prompts and real-world insights designed to support storytelling and help reshape how diseases are portrayed in TV and film. Research and science are evolving rapidly, so this toolkit should be considered a starting point for exploring key themes and areas of interest. To ensure relevance, writers and creators should consult experts to ensure scientific accuracy aligned with the latest research and understanding.

What You Need to Know About This Resource:

This resource is designed for storytellers with some experience bringing short or long-form fictional content to the screen.

The recommendations and suggestions are offered to help content creators think critically about the ways they approach storytelling and reimagine the process of presenting health narratives. One does not need to be an expert on health or storytelling to benefit from the resources provided. Instead, this toolkit has been developed for those willing to learn and be challenged on their preconceived ideas about telling stories that focus on health and disease and, in turn, do the same for their audiences.

How to Use This Toolkit

There are six (6) sections to this toolkit. Each area focuses on a particular aspect of the storytelling process, from story conception to audience engagement. The toolkit can be used as a whole or by approaching the most relevant aspects for a project.

- **01**
Deciding to Tell a Health-Focused Story
- **02**
Writing the Story
- **03**
Casting & Preparing Actors
- **04**
Health on Set
- **05**
Post-Production
- **06**
Support for Audiences

The recommendations provided across the toolkit are informed by research and theory on the impact that media messages can have on audiences. Storytelling can have a variety of effects, moderated by individual differences (e.g., age, gender, personality factors) of audience members. As a result, this toolkit provides content creators with not just suggestions, but reasons *why* these steps matter.



Additionally, Eli Lilly and Company, the sponsor of this study, provided connections to third-party patient advocacy groups and other independent experts to help inform this toolkit. While this information is not medical advice and does not provide a comprehensive view of each disease, it offers content creators a more accurate and authentic perspective on how patients and their communities navigate - and are affected by - the experience of living with some of today's most prominent diseases.

Finally, this toolkit focuses on five diseases:

- *Cancer*
- *Alzheimer's Disease/Dementia*
- *Obesity*
- *Diabetes*
- *Atopic dermatitis (eczema)*

These diseases affect millions of people every year and are underrepresented in popular storytelling. Despite the narrow focus of the toolkit, the overarching principles it offers can be applied to other diseases and conditions. As you use this resource, note how the information may apply to other stories or characters, however it is important to seek further information on those conditions or diseases before moving forward.

Overall, the goal of this toolkit is to encourage increased and more authentic representation of the true patient experience and ground storytellers in the principles that can have the greatest impact on audiences, while also leading to quality stories.

SECTION 01:

Deciding to Tell a Health-Focused Story

Inspiration to tell a health-focused story can come from many areas. Source material, a news story or a social media post may spark an idea. Creatives may have personal experience with disease that they want to incorporate into a script. Writers' rooms may land on a health issue as something to introduce for a character, or an actor may bring their own experience or idea to a characterization.

No matter how the idea is sourced, there are two general steps that creatives should take to ensure the story that emerges is accurate and humanized:

STEP 01: Find the Right Collaborators

It is difficult to tell a story about health on your own. Even if you have had a personal experience with the health condition or disease in the story, there is always more to learn and understand about how audiences process information. Working with specific collaborators who bring lived experience, clinical knowledge and insight into audience impact is key to telling an informed and authentic story.

Collaborators come in a few different forms:

Medical experts: Doctors, pharmacists and care providers can speak about the accuracy of your story.

Patient advocacy groups and other experts on patient experience: These third parties provide insight on the way those who are affected by disease navigate health inside and outside care systems – as well as ensure fair and accurate representation and authentic experiences.

Academics and health literacy experts: Researchers can advise you on the potential impact of your story on audiences and/or measure your priority outcomes.



Each of these groups offers a distinct and important POV to creators on storytelling.

For example: It may be most prudent to work with medical experts to understand the symptoms, diagnostic processes, treatment and prognosis of disease. However, not all medical experts can speak to specific experiences patients may have based on their gender, race/ethnicity or socio-economic status.

Working with patient experts can inform the storyline surrounding how patients access care, the barriers they may face and what life (e.g., at home, work or school) or care may be like for affected individuals.

Academics can also draw on research expertise to advise on what program elements may have the greatest impact on audiences.

STEP 02: Create the Best Outcome

The next sections are structured to help you create the best outcome possible when you begin to write your story.

As you begin to tell the health story you envision, there are two elements to balance. The first is *minimizing problems or negative outcomes* that can result from your story. The second is to *maximize the impact* that your narrative can have on the public's health.

Element One: Minimize Problems or Negative Outcomes

The first thing to consider when crafting your story is how to avoid stereotypical or stigmatizing elements that can limit the effectiveness of your narrative by:

+ Present health conditions and diseases with nuance, avoiding exaggeration that may mislead or stigmatize.

While suspense and dramatic tension are necessary for a good story, balancing those elements with the portrayal of adverse health conditions and diseases is essential. Symptoms, diagnosis and prognosis can all create significant distress for people facing a health issue. When you include those elements in your story, ensure that you carefully showcase them.

- In particular, try not to overdramatize the symptoms your characters face – viewers should see that there are reasons to seek medical care even when symptoms are not extreme.
- Additionally, normalize the diagnostic process as one in which medical professionals collect information to understand whether disease is present and to what extent. Showcasing a process that is routine rather than fraught with difficulty will demonstrate to viewers that screening is important and necessary.

+ Understand real-world survival rate statistics.

Survival rates and long-term health outcomes vary widely across disease, and portrayals in entertainment often fail to reflect this nuance. Helping audiences better understand what it means to live with, manage and hopefully recover from a diagnosis can replace fear-driven narratives with ones that promote empowerment. In fact, while diseases can be life-altering, some are not fatal at all.

As we will describe later, cancer portrayals can often focus on the fatality of the disease. However, many cancers are treatable and manageable.

- Helping viewers recognize that early detection is an important part of successful cancer treatment means reducing the perception that cancer is an automatic death sentence.
- Chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes can be effectively managed, with patients regaining years of healthy life through lifestyle changes and adherence to treatment. A person diagnosed at age 50 may lose an average of six years of life expectancy, but with consistent management, can gain back three to 10 years.³

+ Consider how much humor to feature.

While strong and compelling stories about health issues can be told with humor, think about where that humor originates.

- As we discuss later, the use of humor can trivialize health issues, dehumanize those who experience disease or illness or detract from the sincerity of a story.

+ Clichés can prevent authenticity.

Audience perceptions about how health stories unfold can jeopardize the nuance and authentic elements of your story.

- Try to avoid clichéd elements – the surprise diagnosis with no symptoms, the instant recovery from serious health procedures and miracle cures that result from the love and support of other characters.
- Lean into the daily realities that disease presents, such as healthcare appointments, ongoing screening or limitations on activities.
- Depicting the real-life aspects of living with a health condition or disease allows you to find drama in the everyday rather than the extraordinary.

Element Two: Maximize Positive Impact

Next, you must lean into depicting elements that empower people to take control of their health.

First Consideration - When doing this, the first thing to contemplate is the nature of the story you are trying to tell. Is health the primary storyline? Will a health portrayal occur with a secondary or background character? Will you extend the arc of the health storyline across an entire season? Below are some of the things you must take into consideration:

Lead and Co-Lead Characters

When characters are central to the plot, there will always be more to consider. This is because you will have to think through whether the health condition or disease your character experiences is also part of the plot or whether it must be dealt with while the character is going through the story. What does this mean?

- A storyline involving a person who has cancer can be completely focused on the cancer journey, from diagnosis through treatment, etc.
- On the other side of the spectrum, a character may mention their cancer as a complicating factor while they are saving the planet from alien invaders.
- Once you know what kind of focus you want to place on a health story involving your lead character, you can move forward.

For Stories Where Disease Is the Focus

When your character's disease is the point of the story, your job is to learn all you can about the ways that the illness is presented in people who are similar to your character.

- As you craft the story, consider the experiences that people with this disease have, what they might say about those experiences and what that might look like on screen.
- This is also a strong opportunity to begin working with collaborators, such as medical experts or patient advocates, who can help guide the portrayal early on and ensure accuracy and authenticity throughout the creative process.
- In the casting section, we will discuss what happens when you cast a character from a specific background and how that might impact the decisions you make.

Second Consideration - No matter the size of the role, a few things to keep in mind when presenting disease are below:

Screening

Plan to include elements that promote screening and early diagnosis.

- Show symptoms that foreshadow disease diagnosis, diagnostic tests and processes, counseling, treatment options and potential side effects of treatment.⁴
- Depicting how illness or disease might present may lead to increased knowledge and empower audiences to seek more information.

Symptoms

Consider showcasing the most common symptoms - both seen and unseen - of an illness or what a typical person might feel that would lead them to seek a diagnosis.

- If including rare or extreme symptoms, consider doing so in conjunction with those that are more commonly experienced.
- Calibrate these disease markers to the gender, age, size and race/ethnicity of your character to reflect clinical accuracy and equity.

Diagnostic Tests

Include accurate depictions of how diseases are diagnosed.

- Be specific about the kinds of tests used and how patients may feel while undergoing these tests.
- For example, a blood test, MRI, X-Ray or CT scan might be minimally invasive, while a lumbar puncture may be more intensive. In diagnosing obesity, patients should be portrayed being weighed in a private and discrete setting.
- Avoiding myths about the safety, efficacy or painfulness of diagnostic tests is also important.

Show Audiences Realistic Treatment Options

Provide a clear picture of how different diseases are treated. Treatments span specific medication use, alternative therapies and even decisions about where and how to receive treatment.

There are a few components that will help audiences gain knowledge or even advocate for themselves and others when it comes to treating diseases:

Focus on relevance.

Indicate *why* a medication is right for the disease in your story. You need not show a particular medicine or even call it by name, but you can have your character discuss the reason for using pharmaceuticals to treat their illness or disease.

Show non-pharmaceutical treatment.

Not all treatments require medication use. Physical or occupational therapy, along with other forms of rehabilitation, for example, do not require medication but could be depicted as remedies for certain conditions.

Include clinical trials.

New medications are being developed consistently, and patients who take part in clinical trials ensure that these new treatments are safe and effective. Showing characters who enroll in clinical trials can demystify the process and also provide insights to audiences in general on how these trials are conducted and how patient safety is protected in the process.

Reflect caregiving.

Caregivers can play a part in dispensing medications, particularly when dealing with older or sicker patients. Caregiving is a central part of the healthcare journey for many. This includes not only those caring for elderly or chronically ill individuals, but also parents managing medications for young children, and families navigating care across multiple households. Showing this process is a reflection of the ways that millions of caregivers and patients experience care.

Consider mental health.

Mental health conditions like depression, anxiety and PTSD affect millions but are often stigmatized or misrepresented. Including storylines that reflect realistic mental health challenges, and showing characters seeking therapy, using medication or accessing support systems, can promote understanding and reduce stigma. Portrayals should avoid stereotypes and instead focus on mental health as a key part of overall well-being.

Disease Counseling

Show the process by which characters are given information about their diagnosis.

- Include realistic interactions with care providers or medical professionals.
- Where appropriate, provide information on what patients (characters) can expect to experience as their illness progresses or when they seek treatment.

Include Side Effects & Consequences of Treatment

Sensitively show potential side effects of treatments to help audiences develop an understanding of the disease.

- Avoid exaggeration but clearly depict how and when side effects may appear throughout the treatment process.
- In particular, help audiences understand how side effects of treatments can manifest. Are they likely to occur immediately after, or do they emerge later in the course of treatment?
- As you show side effects, consider how you can show the impact those side effects may have on the continued treatment that characters are using.
- You can also consider who is more likely to experience those side effects – either due to having multiple conditions and/or diseases, specific medical history or other reasons.

Provide Feedback From Other Characters on the Health Issue

Include reactions from other people to model compassion, care and support and help normalize the conversation about health issues.

- Showing tangible ways to help (e.g., offering rides to treatment center, picking up prescriptions, cooking a meal, etc.) is one way to inform viewers.
- Another way is to show emotional support, such as encouragement or shared grieving, that may be needed when confronting a serious illness to help viewers understand how they can support people in their lives dealing with illness. This should also extend to environments where support is often lacking, such as workplaces and schools, to reinforce the importance of empathy and understanding in all aspects of daily life.

Be Aware of Community-Specific Representation, Stigmas and Needs

Here are some things you can do:

- Acknowledge the unique cultural and historical experiences that shape community perceptions towards healthcare.
→ For instance, Black women's pain may be more likely to be minimized by medical professionals than pain expressed by women from other groups.⁵
- In telling a health story focused on a character from a specific background, acknowledge the reasons why members of the community may distrust or avoid doctors, nurses or even medications.
- By leaning into these community-based beliefs, you can acknowledge historical inequities in care, encourage empathy among viewers, reduce stigma and provide a realistic depiction of diagnosis and treatment.

SECTION 02: Writing the Story

There are two areas that must be considered when crafting a story about health portrayals. First, you'll need to consider how you describe the action taking place on screen. Second, the way you talk about illness via character dialogue will need to be examined.

On-Screen Details That Shape Perceptions

What should writers consider when describing actions that surround health portrayals?

First, think about the way you present information about the characters who are most affected by health conditions and disease. Not all characters who are undergoing cancer treatment lose their hair, for example. Have you indicated that your character is wearing a head covering? People with diabetes may wear a glucose monitor on the back of their arm. Have you described the inclusion of a glucose monitor, pump or other medication when sharing information about your character?

There are some specific areas to be mindful of when portraying people with obesity and other diseases – such as Type 2 diabetes – that are often portrayed as conditions driven solely by lifestyle (placing “fault” on the patient) rather than the diseases they are.

One stereotype regarding this health condition is food. When people with obesity are shown on screen in conjunction with unhealthy foods (e.g., fried foods, junk foods, etc.), this can influence negative perceptions of people with these diseases *off* screen.⁶ Similarly, Type 2 diabetes is often linked with unhealthy eating habits, which can lead to misconceptions about the disease.

However, when healthy foods are shown, this effect is minimized. A similar effect occurs with exercise. Showing people with obesity or Type 2 diabetes exercising can reduce the likelihood of developing negative beliefs about people in the real world.⁷

People with these diseases eat healthy foods and engage in all kinds of active behaviors like walking, dancing and sports. Showing these activities not only reflects the real lives of people but can also be part of changing societal beliefs about this community. It's important to recognize that obesity, like Type 2 diabetes, is a disease and should be portrayed as such in media.

Dialogue: Talking About Health

Apart from how people with disease or health conditions are described, another element to storytelling is how characters talk about disease. Language can communicate not just information about a disease but may increase the stigma or incite anxiety surrounding it. What your characters say about illness can be a critical part of helping viewers seek out additional insights and even screening or care for their health concerns. It may also frame disease as something that happens to those who are “deserving.” As such, it's vital that dialogue is reflective of authentic patient experiences.

Use non-technical language when possible (unless appropriate for the setting) (e.g., bad people deserve to be sick and die) or frames disease as inevitable given the choices someone makes at a younger age.

Focus on authentic patient experiences and use person-first language (e.g., say people with diabetes instead of diabetics or living with obesity instead of obese). While lifestyle factors (e.g., drug or alcohol use, diet, exercise) may be important for disease prevention, the use of guilt to encourage behavior change should be carefully managed.⁸

Make sure medical terminology can be understood by viewers (e.g., use non-technical language when possible, bearing in mind that many viewers lack a deep understanding of medical information). Particularly when doctors provide information, model strong patient-clinician interactions by portraying the delivery of diagnoses, test results or prognosis with both technical and non-technical terms.

Consider showing a conversation where a patient asks a clinician to clarify technical language, so it is understandable. Portraying this in a non-confrontational way is important to demonstrate that asking relevant questions and seeking clarification is appropriate with doctors.

Use care with jokes and humor. While there is much humor to be mined from the universal experience of illness, it is imperative to do so in a way that does not evoke stereotypes or unfairly target groups more likely to be diagnosed with specific illnesses. For example, while humorous experiences can occur when caring for someone with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, jokes about diminished capacity of people with the disease can lead to stereotypes about aging that can have a negative impact on older viewers. Additionally, humor focused on people with obesity can dehumanize and stigmatize those living with this disease.

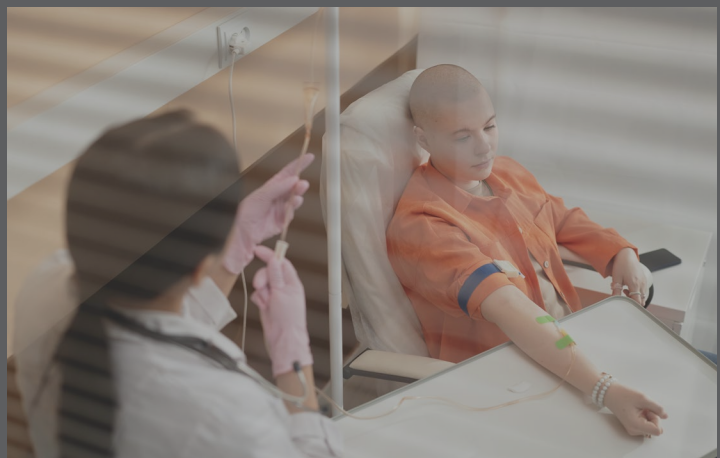
As a writer, the way you describe health conditions and diseases and the dialogue you write for the characters with them, as well as those around them, shapes the way these portrayals are seen on screen. Take care to minimize the likelihood of negative stereotypes, to consider how portrayals can educate viewers and to use stories to model positive interactions with care providers.

Elevating Portrayals

For specific disease states, there are also ways to ensure depictions reflect real-world realities and help viewers see an accurate representation of health issues. Below, we explore specific disease states and ways to increase the relevance and similarity of onscreen portrayals to real-world experiences.

Cancer

- **Reflect the actual patients.** Cancer patients on screen tend to be younger, wealthier and whiter than actual patients.⁹ Approximately 4 out of 5 cancer survivors are aged 60 and older.¹⁰ Consider writing cancer narratives around diverse characters that are older (55+) and less wealthy.
- **Specify the cancer.** It is common to not specify the type of cancer portrayed on screen.¹¹ Add narrative richness by acknowledging the cancer type and showing effects specific to the disease.
- **Portray cancers that are relatable.** When the type of cancer portrayed on screen is specified, rarer and more deadly cancers such as brain cancer, leukemia and lymphoma are often more likely to be portrayed.¹² Yet, at least 40% of cancer cases in the U.S. are linked to modifiable risk factors – lifestyle risk factors that people can change.¹³ Bring the narrative closer to people's lived experiences by portraying more common cancers that affect more people (e.g., breast, colon, prostate, lung).
- **Portray actual symptoms.** Portrayals of cancer often focus on the effects of chemotherapy (e.g., hair loss) without showing actual symptoms of the cancer itself.¹⁴ Heighten portrayal veracity by showing symptoms of the cancer.
- **Cancer is not a death sentence.** More than 18 million people in the U.S. are living with cancer and may be referred to as survivors or thrivers.¹⁵ Multiple studies report that the majority of onscreen cancer portrayals are fatal. However, 69% of people living with cancer in the U.S. survive at least 5 years after their diagnosis, and the cancer death rate has declined 34% since 1991.¹⁶ Rather than portraying cancer as a death sentence, represent the hope and [options](#) that people experiencing cancer have. This can shape cancer perceptions in audiences to be both more optimistic as well as more reflective of the [current state of success](#) in treating the disease.
- **Don't erase suffering.** Many people with cancer deal with lasting challenges, such as physical side effects, changes in daily function and memory, and emotional or financial struggles.¹⁷ While onscreen cancer portrayals are often fatal, they also tend to erase end of life suffering and deterioration by depicting deaths from cancer as peaceful, often occurring in sleep.¹⁸ Be courageous enough to reflect the challenges that can be a part of the cancer experience.



Alzheimer's Disease/Dementia

Don't minimize challenges. On screen portrayals of Alzheimer's and dementia tend to minimize the impact of the condition on both the person diagnosed as well as their caregivers, in part through erasing the aggressiveness and combativeness that can be a part of the condition.¹⁹ Move beyond the softened, stereotypical portrayal of sweet but absent-minded elders. Include the full spectrum of symptoms and behaviors, especially in more advanced stages, which are often absent from current portrayals.

Prioritize the person, not just the condition. Onscreen portrayals should center people living with Alzheimer's or other dementias, not just the diagnosis. Their personalities, interests, relationships and the lives they lead should be depicted to move beyond portraying characters solely through the lens of disease. Be sensitive to the fact that Alzheimer's is a progressive disease and symptoms change and evolve over time.

Clarify terminology. Make clear that Alzheimer's disease is the leading cause of dementia, but there are other types of dementia as well. Distinguishing between these can help improve both scientific accuracy and storytelling clarity.

Highlight caregivers and their challenges. Caregiving is an [emotionally and physically demanding role](#). Elevate stories of caregivers, acknowledging cultural differences and the long-term support they provide. Keep in mind that caregivers are also survivors of the disease's impact and often bear significant emotional and financial burdens. Recognizing caregivers as part of the health journey honors their experiences and can build empathy and understanding among viewers.

Avoid the "miracle cure." This trope consists of an unrealistic portrayal of full lucidity brought on by intense connection with a loved one after long periods of lack of awareness and disorientation.²⁰ These portrayals misrepresent the capacities of people in more advanced stages of Alzheimer's/dementia and can contribute to false hopes in the people close to someone experiencing later stages of the condition. That said, therapies like music can provide meaningful emotional connection and response – portray these not as cures, but as ways to sustain dignity and enhance quality of life.

Portray healthcare. Characters with Alzheimer's/dementia are often not portrayed being diagnosed, [engaging in therapeutic interventions](#) (pharmacological or otherwise) or even consulting with a doctor at all.²¹ This contributes to the myth that healthcare professionals are not of benefit to people experiencing this condition and could make seeking treatment less likely. Include depictions of early warning signs, diagnostic processes, and realistic care options to reflect how families and individuals navigate this journey. Seeking guidance related to portraying early symptoms and the experience of patients and caregivers throughout the process of seeking early diagnosis – including interactions with healthcare providers and loved ones – can be especially helpful to those in this position.

Acknowledge financial barriers. Highlight disparities in access to care, affordability of services, and other systemic challenges. These factors often differ across race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status and should be thoughtfully included. Families often face significant financial burdens in managing Alzheimer's or dementia care. These realities, especially for caregivers, should be shown as central to the caregiving experience.

Life doesn't end at diagnosis. People with Alzheimer's and other dementias remain active and engaged members of their families and communities. Show characters continuing to pursue hobbies, relationships, and purpose. Diagnosis should be a part of the story but not the whole story. Often, families and caregivers continue to live a life that's as normal as possible, taking loved ones out to restaurants, shops and social events after a diagnosis. Portray these lived realities to reflect the fullness of life for those diagnosed with Alzheimer's or other dementias.

Be specific in language. Clarify whether the character has Alzheimer's or another form of dementia, as different types can present with distinct symptoms. Use medical accuracy to inform and educate viewers.

Include younger-onset Alzheimer's. This condition can begin [earlier in life](#) and should be reflected in character demographics and storylines. Alzheimer's is not just a disease of the elderly.

Create teachable moments. Not every character living with dementia must be sympathetic—complex characters can reflect real-life dynamics and allow audiences to learn from their experiences. Some characters may mistreat people living with the disease, and when shown authentically, these interactions can provide critical teachable moments.

Cultural sensitivity. Different cultures treat aging and dementia in distinct ways. Including portrayals that reflect these cultural differences can reduce stigma and broaden understanding of how care and support are expressed and experienced across diverse communities.

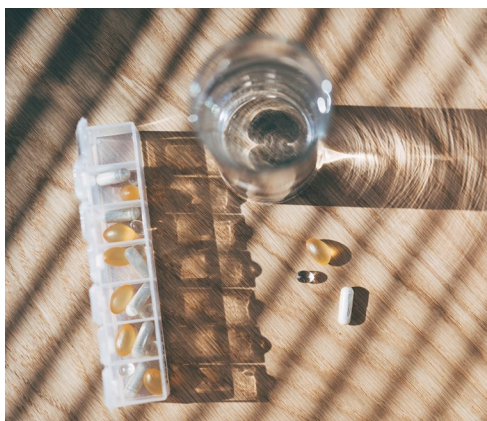
Seek multiple perspectives. When consulting on health portrayals, gather a range of expert and first-hand voices – including people living with the disease, caregivers, clinicians and advocates – to shape a full and accurate picture of characters' experiences. Instead of asking someone to speak for an entire community, be mindful that each perspective is individual, and multiple viewpoints are essential to capturing the full picture.

Reference existing advocate-endorsed media. While not common, examples of accurate portrayals of the Alzheimer's patient and/or caregiver experience – those that handle it with nuance, accuracy and empathy – do exist and can be helpful resources.

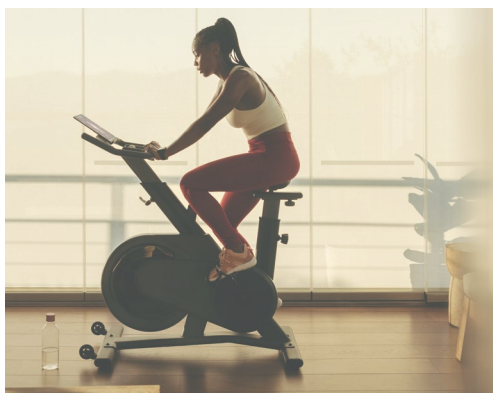
→ For instance, *Slow Horses* portrays the Alzheimer's experience – as well as a breadth of experiences and reactions of those impacted by it – in an accurate and representative way. It also incorporates Alzheimer's to enrich storylines in a show that's not centered around disease. This is important in showing that it's possible to effectively represent Alzheimer's in a variety of projects – not just those centered on disease or health conditions.

Obesity

Recognize obesity as a disease. Having complex physiological and environmental causal factors, obesity is recognized as a disease by the American Medical Association, Obesity Action Coalition and the World Health Organization. Because of the common oversimplification of obesity as resulting from weakness or lack of willpower and the associated stigma, [clearly portraying obesity as a disease](#) benefiting from medical diagnosis and treatment just like many other diseases can shape audience perceptions in a less stigmatizing way.



Don't erase health effects. Portrayals of people with obesity often only consist of showing a person with a high body mass index (BMI) on screen, without any references to health effects associated with obesity such as diabetes, heart disease, joint pain or depression.²² While body positivity and inclusivity in representation are both important, erasing health effects of a disease like obesity can be counterproductive in shaping audience perception of it as a serious disease.



Portray characters with strong positive qualities. Characters with obesity have been found to have fewer interactions with friends, fewer leadership interactions, be rated as less smart, less helpful and be more likely to be unemployed.²³ Negative portrayals of people with obesity can contribute to societal bias and discrimination against people with this disease.²⁴ Counteract the stigma by portraying characters with positive attributes.



Be mindful of physical representation. Characters with obesity are often portrayed in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes, such as being the subject of jokes, defined solely by their weight, or shown engaging in exaggerated eating behaviors.²⁵ Hollywood is no stranger to utilizing not only fat suits but also ill-fitting (often too small), dirty or damaged clothing to further stigmatize individuals. Working with costume design or wardrobe to ensure the use of appropriately sized, clean costume attire helps support more respectful and realistic representations of people with obesity.



Consider real-world demographics of people with obesity. Characters with obesity are more likely to be older, male and African American, while characters portrayed by younger white women are more likely to be underweight.²⁶ This [skewed onscreen representation](#) can shape audience perceptions by accentuating the drive for thinness, particularly in young white women.²⁷



Handle weight-based teasing and ridicule with care. Viewing characters targeted by negative commentary or teasing as a result of living with obesity on screen can make these comments seem more acceptable²⁸ and may promote body dissatisfaction in some younger viewers.²⁹ If teasing is included to reflect real experiences, ensure it's shown in a way that highlights its emotional impact on the person with obesity and reinforces the harm of stigma.



Diabetes

Don't exaggerate or sensationalize.

Portrayals of people with diabetes have been reported to sensationalize the symptoms and management of diabetes, such as by becoming severely hypoglycemic within seconds, quickly falling into a coma or administering glucagon by jabbing a giant needle into the thigh during a hypoglycemia emergency.³⁰ These portrayals misrepresent the condition and can contribute to its stigmatization.

Strive for authentic & inclusive depictions of people with diabetes.

Diabetes disproportionately affects people who are older, from Black, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian communities and those facing systemic barriers like limited access to care, transportation or healthy food.³¹ Accurate representation helps counter harmful stereotypes and supports [greater understanding](#).

Depict everyday challenges.

Successfully managing diabetes means more than medication. It involves discussing decisions around food intake, exercise and alcohol use. Include those conversations and showcase how characters with diabetes make choices about their lifestyle.

Show associated conditions or risks.

People with diabetes may have associated issues that diabetes can exacerbate, particularly if their diabetes is not well-managed. This can include issues with wounds, feet or eyes that may present additional challenges. Showing the full scope of what people with diabetes experience can be a helpful way to educate viewers on the condition.



Ensure nuances are accurately portrayed.

Depictions of diabetes should be accurate to the kind of diabetes the character has (Type 1 or Type 2). The associated patient experience, treatment, etc. will be different for each and, therefore, representations must be specific to their diagnosis.

Consider including distinctions between Type 1 & Type 2 diabetes to avoid reinforcing misconceptions.

Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition where the body stops producing insulin, often diagnosed in children and young adults. Type 2 is a metabolic disease marked by insulin resistance, typically developing in adults but increasingly seen in younger populations

Atopic Dermatitis (Eczema)

Avoid using eczema as a joke.

Rash-like conditions such as dermatitis can be used as a comedic prop to generate humor through embarrassment or discomfort, especially regarding incessant itch.³² Portrayals that convey to audiences that these are actually health issues that might merit treatment or engagement with medical professionals can provide a more comprehensive depiction of the condition beyond just a comedic device.

Recognize that eczema is more than skin deep.

[Eczema is a serious skin disease that can cause significant seen and unseen physical, mental, and quality of life burdens.](#) While some individuals have milder disease that can be managed with over-the-counter approaches and lifestyle changes, millions require advanced therapies to manage their disease. Misrepresentation of the potential severity of this condition and its need for treatment can contribute to neglect of symptoms and stigmatization.

Encourage the 'unhiding' of eczema.

Unlike many other diseases, the visible nature of eczema can lead to efforts to hide the skin (such as wearing long sleeves and pants even in hot weather), withdrawing from social activities when flaring, and for some, giving up on treatment. Consider showing someone with active eczema on their skin but enjoying activities alongside others.

Avoid patient blame.

Eczema patients often blame themselves for their eczema flare-ups: something they did, something they ate, something they came in contact with. While trigger management is part of care, often eczema comes and goes for no known reason despite doing everything right.

Discuss treatment.

Skin conditions can be treated with over the counter or prescription medications that include topical, oral and injectable medications, often used in combination. When showing skin conditions on screen, include [how characters treat and manage these conditions](#) on different parts of the body.

Include non-white skin tones.

As dermatitis symptoms can look different across different skin tones,³³ it is important that [experiences reflective of underrepresented groups](#) are portrayed.

SECTION 03: Casting & Preparing Actors

Once your health portrayal is written, it is depicted by an actor. Casting and preparing actors for roles with a health storyline may need special attention. Below, we discuss two particular areas to focus on.

STEP 01: Partner With Casting Directors to Ensure Accurate Representation

It is easy to have a mental picture of what a character with a health condition or disease “looks like” – maybe you expect someone of a particular age, gender, race/ethnicity or body type. In the casting process, work with casting directors to develop a call for actors that is not limited by your mental picture of what someone with the disease may look like. For example, in our investigation of content, men were more likely to be shown with dementia on screen than women; this is counter to the real-world statistics on disease prevalence.

In line with the recommendations noted above, include depictions of cancer patients who are in their 50s or older. Show people from underrepresented groups – particularly Black, Latino or Native American characters – with diabetes, as these groups are more likely to be diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes than white individuals. Not only will you present an image of health that is aligned with reality, you will also create opportunities for actors who may not always have access to these career opportunities.



STEP 02: Prepare Actors for Accurate Portrayal of Disease

Once you cast your actors (or once you create a new storyline for an existing actor), help them be successful in the role by providing insights and nuance into the health condition or disease their character will face.

You can do this in a few ways:

Encourage the actor to meet with people living with the condition or disease or those providing care who can speak to typical symptoms or experiences.

Provide opportunities to speak with medical experts who can share more particulars about the disease, how it progresses and how it is treated.

Help actors in these roles understand that the goal of showcasing health issues is not to overdramatize the condition or symptoms.

Give actors insight into how the health condition or disease fits into the character’s story arc – is it a defining feature of the character or is it something that they live with and manage daily?

Share with actors how portrayals of health conditions or diseases can be used to educate viewers, encourage screening or treatment or to help audiences develop empathy for those living with specific diseases.

By developing a partnership with actors, you can increase the likelihood that your story about a health condition or disease will be more effective, more truthful and have greater impact on audiences.

SECTION 04: Health on Set

Bringing a script to life involves more than simply great writing and strong actors. It also involves the individuals who bring the setting to life. This includes scenery, set decoration and the crew.

Set Decoration and Props

When your story involves a health event, it is critical to ensure medical devices and information are appropriate and accurate, as well as not perpetuating stereotypes. While it may seem obvious, viewers with medical experience will note when tests are incorrect, equipment is misused or – as one audience member reported – X-ray results are upside down. These are simple areas to address and working with production designers, set decorators and prop masters to facilitate depictions that get things right is important. Additionally, working with collaborators at this stage, such as medical experts or patient advocacy groups, can ensure accuracy and help avoid common missteps or visual clichés. Some things to pay attention to include the following:



Portray the correct tools and tests. Work with medical professionals to understand what specific tools and tests can do. For example, when is an allergy test necessary to diagnose a skin condition and what steps are taken? When should an MRI be used versus a CT scan? What does a biopsy look like when it takes place for skin cancer, breast cancer or other cancers?

Represent results with accuracy. As noted above, showing test results accurately – with X-rays and other imaging in the right direction, correct levels and with the right visualization will help audiences understand what they can expect when they receive test results.



Show techniques and treatments as they really are. Viewers may be unaware that surgical interventions can be minimally invasive due to the development of technology. Showing treatments that reflect the real world is important. For example, not all chemotherapy is delivered intravenously, and there are a variety of ways that medications can be delivered (orally, by injection, or as a lotion or patch). By presenting authentic representations of techniques and treatment, entertainment can minimize anxiety and reduce stigma around health issues.



Avoid stereotypical props when portraying health conditions and diseases. Visual cues, like food choices, medical devices or lifestyle settings, can unintentionally reinforce harmful assumptions. Set and prop choices should be thoughtful and grounded in authenticity to prevent perpetuating stigma. When designing a set for a film or TV show depicting a character with obesity, take care when choosing props and/or crafting scripts to consider what accommodations the character might need to avoid stigmas (e.g., appropriately sized blood pressure cuffs, open MRIs vs. going into the machine, etc.).

Supporting crew during production. In addition to the characters on screen, when you tell a health story you will need to be conscious of the crew involved in the production. The people behind the scenes may have a perspective on the story you are telling due to witnessing a family member's, friend's or even their own health journey. Provide ways for crew members to seek support if the story you are telling brings up difficult thoughts, emotions or reminders. This may mean briefing crew members in advance on the specifics of the story arc, providing on-set counseling or making this available off set and creating support groups for crew members who may need these options.

SECTION 05: Post-Production

After you have written and shot the health story you are telling, there are post-production issues to consider. In particular, you will need to think about the editing process and other visual effects.



Editing Health Stories

As with almost any story, fitting in all the details you'd like to include can be challenging given the limited time you have. As you enter the editing process, identify which aspects of the portrayal are most important to retain – focusing on the items which can be most useful to viewers. This includes symptoms, diagnostic tests and treatments with which the audience may be unfamiliar. While there may not be time to show *all* of these elements, you may be able to incorporate them even in smaller segments. Informing the editing team and other post-production stakeholders of your goals with the story in advance of working together is a key step in communicating what needs to be included in the final product.



Visual Effects

Beyond the story editing process, the ways that visual effects are used in health content merit consideration. While the inclusion of visual effects may be inevitable for a variety of reasons, ensure that the team creating those effects understands the appropriate level of graphic imagery to include. For example, emphasizing skin issues via visual effects should be carefully managed to avoid over-emphasis on redness, scaliness or hives that may not be consistent with actual disease symptoms. Similarly, showing sores, lesions or tumors related to cancer should be done in a realistic way, but should avoid stigmatizing the disease. Images that are too grotesque or graphic may create fear among viewers that can prevent action toward screening or create avoidance or fear of current patients.

Overall, the goal of post-production should be to refine the health storyline that you have incorporated, making sure it fits cleanly within the run time and that the elements that need to be included are present. Working with the teams who edit and post-produce your story, clearly explaining your goals and helping them to understand the nuanced nature of the portrayal are important ingredients for success.



SECTION 06: Support for Audiences

The last phase of your health storyline is releasing it to viewers. There are three areas where you will want to work closely with the distributor of the story to capture the impact that you can have. Two of these occur in preparation for the release of the story, and one happens after.

Publicity and Talking Points for Those Promoting Stories

When promoting your story, you'll need to consider what information your cast, marketing and publicity teams need in advance. Many of these individuals will not be experts on the health issue you're incorporating and might need additional insights, baseline information or to counter myths or misinformation from other sources. People working to promote your show or film may also have their own experiences with the disease or illness in your storyline, and you'll need to be aware of potential sensitivities or knowledge they have that is different from yours.

For press campaigns, create information sheets for media that offer specific insights and details on the illness you are presenting to help journalists understand why you structured the story and the portrayal as you did. Your cast should also have clear talking points that emphasize the importance of people-first language (i.e., people with obesity vs. obese people) and outline the considerations needed for the role they played and why scenes were included/excluded.

This is important for several reasons:

- 01.** Giving talent a set of clear talking points will minimize the likelihood that your message is diluted, changed or missed when they discuss the story.
- 02.** It reduces the potential for anxiety on the part of talent whose public communication experience may not include discussing health topics. Giving talent a clear set of points will help unify the message about the health content just as a promotional pitch would.
- 03.** Offering a clear set of talking points will avoid the need for talent to talk about what they personally know or have experienced regarding the health condition or disease, particularly if they would like that information to remain private.
- 04.** Think about the health storyline the way you might any other aspect of the plot – your creative and marketing teams should have a clear understanding of what they need to communicate publicly and what to say so the message is compelling and accurate.

Campaigns Surrounding Health Stories

One question to consider as you enter production and post-production is whether you and the distributor are interested in creating a larger action campaign around the health portrayal in your story. Campaigns should have a defined target audience, a specific call to action and a measurable impact. For example, you might consider targeting women aged 40 and older with your story. The call to action could be to schedule a mammogram for a breast cancer screening. To accomplish this, you could include a phone number or website to use to find a screening location, assess whether such a screening would be covered by insurance and ultimately to schedule the test. You could measure the number of calls, website visits and scheduled mammograms as a means of capturing your impact.

Creating the campaign is not something you need to do alone. If your distributor has a social impact team, that group can work with you to design a specific call to action. This team can also link you to groups with expertise and experience who can amplify your message and distribute your campaign. If you don't have a social impact team, consider working with an outside agency who can partner with you to design the campaign. These groups can also connect you to organizations whose mission overlaps with the health issue you are covering. By involving these groups, you may be able to provide further support, insights or tools to audiences.





Measure Impact

If you want to know the effect your story has on audiences, you will need a plan to measure its impact. You could collect anecdotal evidence by speaking with viewers. You could also look at social posts or comments about the series or film and analyze the sentiment of those comments. However, the best form of evaluation is one that relies on experts. Working with academics whose expertise is in the impact of health content on audiences will provide valuable insights and structure to the process of understanding your story's effects.

In order to set up a robust impact measurement, the best approach is to involve academics early in the process – even as early as the story development phase. Consulting with academics at this stage can be helpful in planning narrative elements that may be most effective in reaching, informing or moving audience members to action. Even in later stages of project planning and release, academics can help devise an impact measurement strategy that will provide the best metrics on change. While the most important part of telling a health story may be the health narrative itself, understanding the effects that a portrayal might have are also critical. By working with a team to manage the communication strategy, creating a campaign and measuring the impact of your story, you can understand the true effect your story has on audience members.

Summary

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide a broad understanding of what steps are necessary in telling a story focused on a health issue. While this document covers quite a bit of territory, it is by no means exhaustive. You will need to do additional research, consult experts and work with collaborators to fulfill your vision of telling a compelling story with nuance, authenticity and accuracy. By adding these voices to yours, you can deepen your understanding of the complexity of the disease state you are portraying and provide a more holistic story to audiences. Overall, you can ensure that the story you tell has the potential to reach – and help – the many viewers who live with a health issue every day. Special thanks to our sponsor, Eli Lilly and Company, for their collaboration in helping bring this toolkit to life. Their support, alongside the Obesity Action Coalition, National Eczema Association, American Diabetes Association, American Cancer Society and Alzheimer's Association, has been instrumental in advancing more inclusive and accurate health storytelling in entertainment.

Contact Information

For more information or additional insights on these topics, reach out to one of the following patient advocacy organizations:

[Obesity Action Coalition](#)

[National Eczema Association](#)

[American Diabetes Association](#)

[American Alzheimer's Association](#)

[American Cancer Society](#)

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In addition to the resources provided by this toolkit, we also encourage content creators to find other references on the health topics covered in this document. While some links appear throughout the toolkit, we've compiled an additional set of sources that will provide further insights into the diagnosis, treatment and advances related to each of the health conditions covered here.

There have been numerous advances that may assist physicians and oncologists with cancer diagnosis, potentially including practices like [precision oncology](#) and [liquid biopsies](#). AI tools are emerging, for example, that may be able to assist doctors in the [diagnosis and treatment](#) of different types of cancer.

While learning about the science behind advancement is important for discovering new stories to tell, listening to real experiences of adverse health can also be informative. Audiences have access to the real-life health stories of notable actors, content creators, athletes, and influencers around [Type 2 diabetes](#), [weight loss](#), [eczema](#), and cancer. These stories can offer individual perspectives that can be useful for storytellers who want to learn about onset, symptoms, diagnoses, treatment and lifestyle changes.

2025 Advancing Health Storylines in Popular Entertainment

Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Dr. Katherine Pieper, and W. Michael Sayers

