

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 20, 2020

The Honorable Stephen Hahn, MD, Commissioner
Food and Drug Administration
10903 New Hampshire Avenue,
Silver Spring, MD 20993

Dear Commissioner Hahn:

I write to express my serious concern regarding the risks posed to teenagers and young adults resulting from the rising popularity of dangerous social media challenges and to request more information regarding actions being taken by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to ensure that teenagers and young adults are protected from medically dangerous content online.¹

As teenagers and young adults spend an increasing amount of time online during the pandemic, we are concerned about recent reports highlighting an increase in the number of teenagers and young adults engaging in “challenges”—viral videos on social media platforms that highlight people engaging in silly or dangerous conduct that may result in illness or injury.² While many of these challenges are harmless, several such challenges have led to the hospitalization, and even death, of a number of teenagers.³ In August, a 15-year-old girl died from an overdose of Benadryl and three other teens were hospitalized after participating in the “Benadryl Challenge”—an online challenge that encouraged participants to film themselves consuming large doses of Benadryl and spread rapidly over the social media application TikTok.⁴

The FDA plays a critical role in protecting the public health by regulating the manufacturing, marketing, and distribution of medication. While the FDA continues to examine the phenomenon of dangerous social media challenges and has engaged with platforms to monitor and prevent further harm to young Americans, it is clear that much more must be done. Teens with underlying mental health conditions, teens who may be at risk for substance use disorder, and teens suffering from social isolation associated with the pandemic face increased risk when viewing online content that encourages dangerous behavior, including experimentation with over-the-counter medication.

While each major social media platform has internal policies that govern the removal of harmful content—including content that encourages teens and young adults to engage in dangerous behavior and self-harm—these standards are typically incomplete and inconsistent and often go unenforced. Agencies must take action to ensure that our teenagers and young adults are

¹ CNN (2020, October 29). *US teens use screens more than seven hours a day on average -- and that's not including school work media.* [https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/29/health/common-sense-kids-media-use-report-wellness/index.html#:~:text=\(CNN\)%20US%20teens%20spend%20an,screens%20for%20school%20and%20homework](https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/29/health/common-sense-kids-media-use-report-wellness/index.html#:~:text=(CNN)%20US%20teens%20spend%20an,screens%20for%20school%20and%20homework)

² New York Times (2020, March 26). *Viral Challenges Are What's Keeping Us Occupied.* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/style/viral-challenges-coronavirus.html>.

³ Oklahoma's News 4 (2020, August 28). *Dangerous 'Benadryl Challenge' on TikTok blamed for teen's death.* <https://www.wfla.com/news/health-news/dangerous-benadryl-challenge-on-tiktok-blamed-for-teens-death/>

⁴ NBC News (2020, September 24). *FDA issues warning on 'Benadryl Challenge,' a rumored viral trend.* <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/fda-issues-warning-benadryl-challenge-rumored-viral-trend-n1240986>

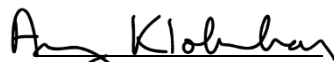
protected online and have the necessary tools to make educated decisions about the content they consume and post online.

In order to better protect teenagers and young adults from the adverse health effects associated with dangerous social media challenges and help inform parents who are rightly concerned about these challenges, I respectfully request that you provide answers to the following questions:

1. What action has the FDA taken to work with social media companies to educate and protect teenagers and young adults from social media challenges that have negative health implications?
2. What steps is the FDA taking to educate parents about dangerous challenges and unsafe online practices involving teenagers and young adults?
3. Does the FDA require additional authority and resources from Congress to better protect teenagers and young Americans from the harmful effects of unhealthy social media challenges? If so, please describe the authority and resources needed in detail.
4. Please provide any updates regarding the FDA's efforts to investigate and review reports of Benadryl abuse posted on the social media application TikTok.⁵

Thank you for your prompt attention to this serious matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

⁵ FDA (2020, September 24). *FDA warns about serious problems with high doses of the allergy medicine diphenhydramine (Benadryl)*. <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-and-availability/fda-warns-about-serious-problems-high-doses-allergy-medicine-diphenhydramine-benadryl#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Food%20and%20Drug.%2C%20coma%2C%20or%20even%20death>