

Online Health Information: Can You Trust It?



A group of older adults are gathered for their weekly computer class. They are learning to use the Internet to find health information. Maria's husband, who is 75, had a stroke the month before so she's searching the web for some basic facts about stroke rehabilitation. Walter, who is 68, has questions about what causes Alzheimer's disease because he thinks that's what his mother had. Shirley and Howard, married for 48 years, are trying to find out if the cataract surgery their eye doctor suggests really is as safe as he says. The whole group has one big worry—"How can we trust the health information we get on the Internet?"

How do I find reliable health information online?

As a rule, health websites sponsored by Federal government agencies are good sources of health information. You can reach all Federal websites by visiting www.usa.gov. Large professional organizations and well-known medical schools may also be good sources of health information.

The main page of a website is called the home page. The home page shows you the features on the website. You should be able to spot the name of the sponsor of the website right away.

Places To Start

There are a few good places to start if you are looking for online health information. An excellent source of reliable information is the National Institutes of Health (www.nih.gov). You can start here to find information on almost every health topic, including:

- managing heart disease (www.nhlbi.nih.gov)
- dealing with deafness (www.nidcd.nih.gov)
- taking care of dentures (www.nidcr.nih.gov)
- caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease (www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov)

In addition, you can visit the National Library of Medicine's Medline Plus (www.medlineplus.gov) for dependable information on more than 700 health-related topics.

You can also visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov)—a website with health information designed specifically for older people.

What questions should I ask?

As you search online, you are likely to find websites for many health agencies and organizations that are not well-known. By answering the following questions you should be able to find more information about these websites. A lot of these details can be found under the heading, "About Us" or "Contact Us."

Who sponsors the website? Can you easily identify the sponsor?

- .gov identifies a government agency
- .edu identifies an educational institution
- .org identifies professional organizations (e.g., scientific or research societies, advocacy groups)
- .com identifies commercial websites (e.g., businesses, pharmaceutical companies, sometimes hospitals)

Is it obvious how you can reach the sponsor?

Trustworthy websites will have contact information for you to use. They often have a toll-free telephone number. The website home page should list an e-mail address, phone number, or a mailing address where the sponsor and/or the authors of the information can be reached.

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Who wrote the information?

Authors and contributors should be identified. Their affiliation and any financial interest in the content should also be clear. Be careful about testimonials. Personal stories may be helpful, but medical advice offered in a case history should be considered with a healthy dose of skepticism. There is a big difference between a website developed by a person with a financial interest in a topic versus a website developed using strong scientific evidence. Reliable health information comes from scientific research that has been conducted in government, university, or private laboratories.

Who reviews the information? Does the website have an editorial board?

Click on the “About Us” page to see if there is an editorial board that checks the information before putting it online. Find out if the editorial board members are experts in the subject you are researching. For example, an advisory board made up of attorneys and accountants is not medically authoritative. Some websites have a section called, “About Our Writers” instead of an editorial policy. Dependable websites will tell you where the health information came from and how it has been reviewed.

When was the information written?

New research findings can make a difference in making medically smart choices. So, it’s important to find out when the information you are reading was written. Look carefully on the home page to find out when the website was last updated. The date is often found at the bottom of the home page. Remember: older information isn’t useless. Many websites provide older articles so readers can get an historical view of the information.

Is your privacy protected? Does the website clearly state a privacy policy?

This is important because, sadly, there is fraud on the Internet. Take time to read the website’s policy—if the website says something like, “We share information with companies that can provide you with products,” that’s a sign your information isn’t private. Do not give out your Social Security number. If you are asked for personal information, be sure to find out how the information is being used by contacting the website sponsor by phone, mail, or the “Contact Us” feature on the website. Be careful when buying things on the Internet. Websites without security may not protect your credit card or bank account information. Look for information saying that a website has a “secure server” before purchasing anything online.

Does the website make claims that seem too good to be true? Are quick, miraculous cures promised?

Be careful of claims that any one remedy will cure a lot of different illnesses. Be skeptical of sensational writing or dramatic cures. Make sure you can find other websites with the same information. Don’t be fooled by a long list of links—any website can link to another, so no endorsement can be implied from a shared link. Take the “too good to be true” test—information that sounds unbelievable probably is unbelievable.

A final note

Use your common sense and good judgment when evaluating health information online. There are websites on nearly every conceivable health topic and no rules overseeing the quality of the information. Take a deep breath and think a bit before acting on any health information you find on the web. Don’t count on any one website. If possible, check with several sources to confirm the accuracy of your results. And remember to talk with your doctor.

From www.nia.nih.gov

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