

Health Information on the Web: Finding Reliable Information

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“Don’t believe everything you read.” It’s an old warning that is especially true for health-related information you find on the World Wide Web.

The Web can be a great resource when you want to learn about a specific disease or health condition. You can also find tips on staying healthy. But among the millions of websites that offer health-related information, there are many that present myths and half-truths as if they are facts.

To avoid unreliable health information when you’re surfing the Web, ask yourself the following questions:

Where did this information come from?

Any website that provides health-related information should tell you the information’s source. See if you can find answers to the following questions:

- Who wrote this information? Keep in mind that many health-related websites post information that comes from other sources. If the person or organization that runs the website didn’t write the information, the original source should be clearly stated.
- If a health care professional didn’t write the information, was it reviewed by a doctor or another medical expert?
- If the information contains any statistics, do the numbers come from a reliable source?
- Does something on the website appear to be someone’s opinion rather than a fact? If so, is the opinion from a qualified person or organization (such as a doctor or medical organization)?

How current is this information?

Health information is constantly changing. For example, researchers continue to learn new things about various diseases and their treatments. You should know whether the health-related information you’re reading is up-to-date. Many Web pages will post the date on which the page was last reviewed or updated. You can usually find this date at the very bottom of the page. If this date isn’t included, check to see whether the page has a copyright line. This tells you when the information was originally written. If the page you’re reading hasn’t been reviewed in the past year, look for more recently updated information.

Who is responsible for the content of the website?

Before you believe any health-related information you find on the Web, find out who is responsible for information on the site. The easiest way to do this is to look at the site’s home page. If the home page doesn’t tell you who publishes the site, look for a link that says “About us” or “About this site.” Often, this link will be at the bottom of the home page. Clicking on this link will usually take you to a page that explains what person or organization is responsible for the information on the site.

Websites published by an organization. Health-related websites may be published by the U.S. government (.gov), a nonprofit organization (.org) or a college or university (.edu). These sites may be the most reliable sources of health information because they’re usually not supported by for-profit companies, such as drug or insurance companies. However, you still need to find out where these sites get their information.

Sites with .com Web addresses may represent a specific company or be published by a company that uses the Web to sell products or services. These are called commercial sites. Commercial sites can offer useful and accurate information. You may want to be more careful about believing the information you read on these sites, though. The information may not be fair and accurate if the company that pays for the site has something to gain from it. It's a good idea to double-check information you read on commercial websites.

Websites published by an individual. Websites published by individuals may offer support and advice about coping with certain conditions and their treatments. These sites can contain reliable and useful information. However, it's very important to double-check health information you see on a website published by an individual. While many of these sites contain good information, some may contain myths or rumors.

Other Organizations

Remember:

Information that you find on a website does not replace your doctor's advice. Your doctor is the best person to answer questions about your personal health. If you read something on the Web that doesn't agree with what your doctor has told you, ask him or her about it.

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