University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital

Online health information - what can you trust?

Definition

When you have a question about your or your family's health, you may look it up on the Internet. You can find accurate health information on many sites. But, you are also likely to run across a lot of questionable, even false content. How can you tell the difference?

To find health information you can trust, you have to know where and how to look. These tips can help.

What to Look For

With a bit of detective work, you can find information you can trust.

- Search for websites of well-known health institutions. Medical schools, professional health organizations, and hospitals often provide online health content.
- Look for ".gov," ".edu," or ".org" in the web address. A ".gov" address means the site is run by a government agency. A ".edu" address indicates an educational institution. And a ".org" address often means a professional organization runs the site. A ".com" address means a for-profit company runs the site. It may still have some good information, but the content may be biased.

- Find out who wrote or reviewed the content. Look for health care providers such as doctors (MDs), nurses (RNs), or other licensed health professionals. Also look for an editorial policy. This policy can tell you where the site gets its content or how it is created.
- Look for scientific references. Content is more reliable if it is based on scientific studies. Professional journals are good references. These include the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Recent editions of medical textbooks are also good references.
- Look for the contact information on the site. You should be able to reach the site sponsor by telephone, email, or a mailing address.
- No matter where you find the information, check how old the content is. Even trusted sites may have out-of-date information archived. Look for content that is no more than 2 to 3 years old. Individual pages may have a date at the bottom that says when it was last updated. Or the home page may have such a date.
- Beware of chat rooms and discussion groups. The content in these forums is typically not reviewed or regulated. Plus it may come from people who are not experts, or who are trying to sell something.
- DO NOT rely on just one website. Compare the information you find on a site with content from other sites. Make sure other sites can back up the information you have found.

Things to Keep in Mind

While searching for health information online, use common sense and be wary.

- If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. Beware of quick-fix cures. And remember that a money-back guarantee does not mean that something works.
- As with any kind of website, it is important to be careful with your personal information. DO NOT give out your Social Security number. Before you buy anything, be sure that the site has a secure server. This will help protect your credit card information. You can tell by looking in the box near the top of the screen that cites the web address. At the start of the web address, look for "https".
- Personal stories are not scientific fact. Just because someone claims that their personal health story is true, it does not mean that it is. But even if it is true, the same treatment may not apply to your case. Only your provider can help you find the care that is best for you.

Where to Start

Here are a few high-quality resources to get you started.

- American Heart.org -- www.americanheart.org: Information on heart disease and ways to prevent disease. From the American Heart Association.
- Diabetes.org -- www.diabetes.org: Information on diabetes and ways to prevent, manage, and treat the disease. From the American Diabetes Association.
- Familydoctor.org -- www.familydoctor.org: General health information for families. Produced by the American Academy of Family Physicians.
- Healthfinder.gov -- healthfinder.gov/: General health information. Produced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- HealthyChildren.org -- www.healthychildren.org/English/Pages/default.aspx: Information on children's health. From the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- CDC -- www.cdc.gov/: Health information for older adults. From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- NIHSeniorHealth.gov -- www.nihseniorhealth.gov: Health information for older adults. From the National Institutes of Health.

When to Call the Doctor

It is great that you are seeking information to help you manage your health. But keep in mind that online health information can never replace a talk with your provider. Talk to your provider if you have questions about your health, your treatment, or anything you read online. It can be helpful to print out the articles you have read and bring them with you to your appointment.

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Revision

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Disclaimers

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