

AgePage

Online Health Information: Is It Reliable?

Many older adults share a common concern: “How can I trust the health information I find on the Internet?”

There are thousands of medical websites. Some provide reliable health information. Some do not. Some of the medical news is current. Some of it is not. Choosing which websites to trust is an important step in gathering reliable health information.

Where Can I Find Reliable Health Information Online?

The National Institutes of Health website, *www.nih.gov*, is a good place to start for reliable health information.

As a rule, health websites sponsored by Federal Government agencies are good sources of 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.

MedlinePlus.gov is a website from the NIH’s National Library of Medicine that has dependable consumer information about more than 1,000 health-related topics. Use their online tutorial to learn how to evaluate health information online at <https://medlineplus.gov/webeval/webeval.html>.

Questions to Ask Before Trusting a Website

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 might be found in the website’s “About Us” section.

1. Who sponsors/hosts the website? Is that information easy to find?

Websites cost money to create and update. Is the source of funding (sponsor) clear? Knowing who is funding the website may give you insight into the mission or goal of the site. Sometimes, the website address (called a URL) is helpful. For example:

- **.gov** identifies a U.S. government agency

- **.edu** identifies an educational institution, like a school, college, or university
- **.org** usually identifies nonprofit organizations (such as professional groups; scientific, medical, or research societies; advocacy groups)
- **.com** identifies commercial websites (such as businesses, pharmaceutical companies, and sometimes hospitals)

2. Who wrote the information? Who reviewed it?

Authors and contributors are often, but not always, identified. If the author is listed, ask yourself—is this person an expert in the field? Does this person work for an organization and, if so, what are the goals of the organization? A contributor’s connection to the website, and any financial stake he or she has in the information on the website, should be clear.

Is the health information written or reviewed by a healthcare professional? Dependable websites will tell you where their health information came from and how and when it was reviewed.

Trustworthy websites will have contact information that you can use to reach the site’s sponsor or authors. An email address, phone number, and/or mailing address might be listed at the bottom of every page or on a separate “About Us” or “Contact Us” page.

Be careful about testimonials. Personal stories may be helpful and comforting, but not everyone experiences health problems the same way. Also, there is a big difference between a website, blog, or social media page developed by a single person interested in a topic and a website developed using strong scientific evidence (that is, information gathered from research).

No information should replace seeing a doctor or other health professional who can give you advice that caters to your specific situation.

3. When was the information written?

Look for websites that stay current with their health information. You don’t want to make decisions about your care based on out-of-date information. Often, the bottom of the page will have a date. Pages on the same site may be updated at different times—some may be updated more often than others. Older information isn’t useless, but using the most current, evidence-based information is best.

4. What is the purpose of the site?

Why was the site created? Know the motive or goal of the website so you can better judge its content. Is the purpose of the site to inform or explain? Or is it trying to sell a product? Choose information based on scientific evidence rather than one person’s opinion.

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

Read the website’s privacy policy. It is usually at the bottom of the page or on a separate page titled “Privacy Policy” or “Our Policies.” If a website says it uses “cookies,” your information may not be private. While cookies may enhance your web experience, they can also compromise your online privacy—so it is important to read how the website will use your information. You can choose to disable the use of cookies through your Internet browser settings.

6. How can I protect my health information?

If you are asked to share personal information, be sure to find out how the information will be used. Secure websites that collect personal information responsibly have an “s” after “http” in the start of their website address (https://) and often require that you create a username and password.

BE CAREFUL about sharing your Social Security number. Find out why your number is needed, how it will be used, and what will happen if you do not share this information. Only enter your Social Security number on secure websites. You might consider calling your doctor’s office or health insurance company to give this information over the phone, rather than giving it online.

These precautions can help better protect your information:

- Use common sense when browsing the Internet. Do not open unexpected links. Hover your mouse over a link to confirm that clicking it will take you to a reputable website.
- Use a strong password. Include a variation of numbers, letters, and symbols. Change it frequently.
- Use two-factor authentication when you can. This requires the use of two different types of personal information to log into your mobile devices or accounts.
- Do not enter sensitive information over public Wi-Fi that is not secure. This includes Wi-Fi that is not password protected.

Be careful what information you share over social media sites. This can include addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses. Learn how you can keep your information private.

7. Does the website offer quick and easy solutions to your health problems? Are miracle cures promised?

Be careful of websites or companies that claim any one remedy will cure a lot of different illnesses. Question dramatic writing or cures that seem too good to be true. Make sure you can find other websites with the same information. Even if the website links to a trustworthy source, it doesn’t mean that the site has the other organization’s endorsement or support.

Health and Medical Apps

Mobile medical applications (“apps”) are apps you can put on your smartphone. Health apps can help you track your eating habits, physical activity, test results, or other information. But, anyone can develop a health app—for any reason—and apps may include inaccurate or misleading information. Make sure you know who made any app you use.

When you download an app, it may ask for your location, your email, or other information. Consider what the app is asking from you—make sure the questions are relevant to the app and that you feel comfortable sharing this information. Remember, there is a difference between sharing your personal information through your doctor’s online health portal and posting on third-party social media or health sites.

Social Media and Health Information

Social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, are online communities where people connect with friends, family, and strangers. Sometimes, you might find health information or health news on social media. Some of this information may be true, and some of it may not be. Recognize that just because a post is from a friend or colleague it does not necessarily mean it’s true or scientifically accurate.

A Quick Checklist

You can use the following checklist to help make sure that the health information you are reading online can be trusted. You might want to keep this checklist by your computer.

1. Is the sponsor/owner of the website a Federal agency, medical school, or large professional or nonprofit organization, or is it related to one of these?
2. If not sponsored by a Federal agency, medical school, or large professional or nonprofit organization, is the website written by a healthcare professional or does it reference one of these trustworthy sources for its health information?
3. Why was the site created? Is the mission or goal of the website sponsor clear?
4. Can you see who works for the agency or organization and who authored the information? Is there a way to contact the sponsor of the website?
5. When was the information written or webpage last updated?
6. Is your privacy protected?
7. Does the website offer unbelievable solutions to your health problem(s)? Are quick, miracle cures promised?

Check the source of the information, and make sure the author is credible. Fact-checking websites can also help you figure out if a story is reliable.

Trust Yourself and Talk to Your Doctor

Use common sense and good judgment when looking at health information online. There are websites on nearly every health topic, and many have no rules overseeing the quality of the information provided. Use the information you find online as one tool to become more informed. Don't count on any one website and check your sources. Discuss what you find with your doctor before making any changes to your health care.

For More Information About Reliable Health Websites

MedlinePlus: Evaluating Internet Health Information National Library of Medicine

www.medlineplus.gov/evaluatinghealthinformation.html
<https://medlineplus.gov/webeval/webeval.html>

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

1-800-633-4227 (toll-free)
1-877-486-2048 (TTY/toll-free)
<https://www.medicare.gov/forms-help-resources/help-fight-medicare-fraud/tips-prevent-fraud>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1-800-232-4636 (toll-free)
1-888-232-6348 (TTY/toll-free)
cdcinfo@cdc.gov
www.cdc.gov

HealthFinder.gov

www.healthfinder.gov

U.S. Food and Drug Administration

1-888-463-6332 (toll-free)
druginfo@fda.hhs.gov
www.fda.gov/forconsumers/protectyourself/healthfraud/default.htm

For more information about health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)
niaic@nia.nih.gov
www.nia.nih.gov

Visit www.nia.nih.gov/health to find more health and aging information from NIA and subscribe to email alerts. Visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order free print publications.



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