How to Find Trustworthy Health Information on the Internet

Trustworthy health information is an important tool you can use to make sure you get quality health care. When you need health information, websites can be a great resource. You can use them to find:

- Health and health care information
- Tools for staying healthy
- Information on understanding and comparing health care quality
- Summaries of medical research studies
- Information on getting safe care
- Health and wellness news

But not all information on the internet is dependable or correct. To find health information you can trust, you need to be careful about which websites you use, because:

- Some websites have reliable, accurate health information for consumers that is backed by solid medical research. These websites are trustworthy and can be very helpful.
- But other websites contain health information that is questionable or just plain wrong. The internet is not regulated, so there is no one checking each website to see if the information is true.

Tips for finding and using health information

- Visit more than one website and compare what you find. In general, information is more trustworthy when you find it on more than one website.
- Collect health information from sources besides websites. You could ask your doctor or other health professionals, your health plan, and library staff.
- Talk with your health care team about any health information you find on your own. Consider bringing a copy with you to a medical visit. And ask questions, especially if the information disagrees with something you've been told.

Website features you should look for

To evaluate a website, start by looking for the features listed below. When you find these features, you can feel more confident about trusting the information on the site.

Does the website tell you who is responsible for the site? Does it also tell how you contact the site?

- To find out who is responsible for a site, look for links on the home page that say "About Us," "About This Site" or "Contact Us." Check the bottom of the home page for a copyright notice. Look for other links such as "Our Sponsors," "Privacy Policy" or "Editorial Board." If you can't find out who runs the site, you should be suspicious.
- A website should make it easy for you to get in touch with the webmaster or the organization sponsoring the site. It should give a phone number, email address or other contact information.

Is the website's only purpose to give you information (not to sell you something)?

- To find the most trustworthy health information, look for websites run by nonprofit educational or medical organizations or government agencies. Usually, the only purpose of these sites is to provide information. You can often tell these sites by the ending of their name:
  - .gov for government
  - .edu for educational institutions
  - .org for nonprofit organizations such as medical foundations, medical associations and community organizations
- Be cautious about using health information from websites that sell products or services. You can often tell these sites by the ending of their name:
  - .com, .net or others for commercial sites
- Some commercial sites provide trustworthy information. Others focus mainly on information that supports what they are selling, and this health information can be misleading or false.

If the website asks for information about you, does it say why and explain exactly what it will do with your personal information?

- Sometimes websites want you to share information about yourself. Some websites have strict safeguards to protect your information, but others do not. Some websites even sell your personal information to other organizations.
- Before you give out any personal information, find the website's privacy policy. Frequently you can find a link to it on the home page, often at the bottom. Read the privacy policy carefully and decide whether the policy is trustworthy and if it gives you the protection you want. If you have any doubts or concerns, do not share any personal information with the website.

Is the health information on the website based on results from medical research? Is it backed by references to research studies?

- The most trustworthy health information is based on medical research. Evidence from research studies on patient care tells which types of health care work best for particular health conditions.
- Look for health information that discusses the results from medical research. It should include references to articles in medical journals or other sources to support its claims.

Does the website give the sources of the health information? Does it tell whether medical experts have reviewed and approved the information?

- Sometimes websites contain health information written specifically for the website. Other times, the information comes from a different source. The website should always identify the information source. If you are not able to tell where the information comes from, be cautious about trusting it.
- A website should say something about the people who wrote the health information it offers. You can feel more confident about trusting the information if you know it was written by well-qualified health professionals.
- Before health information is put on a website, it should be checked carefully to be sure it is accurate and up to date. Ideally, the information should be reviewed and approved by medical experts before it appears on the website. Look for descriptions on the home page or links to "Advisory Board," "Editorial Board," "Reviewers" or "Review Policies."

- Some websites give information that compares the quality of care provided by hospitals, nursing homes, medical groups or other health care providers. These websites should explain where the information comes from, what it means and how it is checked for accuracy.

Does the health information seem unbiased, objective and balanced? Is it written in a professional manner using simple language?

- When you find health information on a website, it should be easy for you to tell which parts of the information are based on solid medical evidence and which are opinions.

- You can feel more confident about using health information when it includes different points of view, mentions limitations of the information and gives cautions about its use. When opinions are given, they should be supported with reasons. Be very careful about using information that seems biased, too subjective, or imbalanced.

- Health information for consumers should sound professional and be easy to understand. Terms that are unfamiliar or technical should be clearly explained. When information is poorly written or too complicated, it is easy to misinterpret.

Is the health information up-to-date? Is there a regular review and update of the site?

- A website should include dates that tell you when the health information was prepared and when the site has been reviewed and updated.

Overall, does the health information seem reasonable and believable?

- Keeping all these important features in mind, trust your instincts about the health information you find on websites. If it doesn't seem reasonable and believable, then don't use it. Wanting something to be true doesn't make it true.

- When you see your doctor or other health professionals, you can talk about the health information you have found on websites or from other sources like libraries. You may want to take a copy of that information with you to your medical visit and ask questions about it.

Find trustworthy resources at www.wacommunitycheckup.org/ownyourhealth.

Own Your Health is a campaign presented by the Washington Health Alliance to empower consumers to become active participants in their own health and health care.

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