

Tips for Finding Good Health Information Online

According to the American Association of Retired People (AARP), the Internet can be a mixed blessing when it comes to health care. We now have more health information at our fingertips than anyone dreamed possible just a few short years ago.

But how much of it can we trust? How can we tell the difference between good and bad health information, especially when there's so much of it? This becomes a very important question when you consider that many people rely on the Internet to learn about illnesses or make decisions about care and treatment - sometimes for very serious conditions.

There are no rules policing the kind of health information that turns up on the Internet or who puts it there. There is a group that health site owners can seek approval from on their own. Health sites approved by the Health On the Net Foundation sport a red and blue "seal of approval" to tell users the information is reliable. To earn a seal, the Web site has to meet eight Foundation conditions. However, there are plenty of sites without this seal that contain good health information.

How to Recognize Good Sites

As health care consumers, we have a big job: We must decide which information is good based on common sense, sound judgment, and some general guidelines. That can be hard. Here's what to look for:

Where the information comes from

Always pay close attention to where the information on the site you're looking at comes from. Good sources of health information include:

- "Dot gov," or government sites like the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- University or medical school sites, such as Johns Hopkins University Medicine and the University of California at Berkeley
- Hospital, health system, and other health care facility sites like the Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic

- "Dot orgs," or not-for-profit groups whose focus is research and teaching the public about specific diseases or conditions, such as the American Diabetes Association, the American Cancer Society, and the American Heart Association
- Medical and science journals, such as the "New England Journal of Medicine" and the "Journal of the American Medical Association," although these aren't written for consumers and could be hard to understand

Check to see if the information you're reading refers to experts in the field or to medical studies, reports, or articles. Be careful of sites that don't say where the information comes from. Ask yourself the purpose of the site. Is it to inform? To sell a product? To raise money? Be on the lookout for sites trying to sell a product, service, or opinion.

Whether the information checks out

Compare the information you find on a site with other sites, news accounts, or library resources to see if it says the same thing. You also can get your doctor's opinion by asking whether he or she is familiar with the information you uncovered.

How old is the information?

Because health information changes quickly and often, a good health site needs to be up-to-date. Check when the information was posted on the site. Usually the date will appear at the bottom, or sometimes at the top, of the Web page. How old is the information? Does the site mention how often it is updated? Does the information before you reflect the most current thinking and medical findings available? You might have to research other Web sites or go to other information sources to find out.

Does the information sound "too good to be true"?

If the information sounds unbelievable, it probably is. Some Web sites push miracle cures for cancer and other diseases without enough evidence or studies to show they work. Be on guard for misleading reports of medical information. Sometimes reporters misrepresent study findings because they don't understand them or because they're trying to make a story more interesting or "newsy." Shop around to see if other sources support the

information you have. Check for links. Reliable sites are more likely to link to others with similar information. Beware of sites that link only to a search engine.

Does the Website tell you to do something immediately?

Be careful of any site that wants you to take action right now (buy something, send personal information or money). No matter how good a plan or remedy might seem, check the information out or talk to a doctor before acting on it.

Because health care issues can be complex, even medically reliable consumer information can be hard to understand at times. Look for sites that explain things clearly and completely. If you're not sure you understand something you read, look for more information or ask your doctor or someone with health care training to explain it to you. Misunderstanding health information can be dangerous.

Chat Rooms

Health sites with discussion boards and chat rooms allow Internet users to support one another and share health information and experiences. Some chats feature medical experts who answer consumer questions online. While information you get from these sources can be helpful, they shouldn't be the basis for making decisions about your care. In fact, no health information you find on the Internet should replace a doctor's medical advice. Instead, it should help you learn about your problem and treatment options so you can work better with your doctor to get the best care possible.

If you're looking for information online because you don't like or believe what your doctor has told you, get a second opinion or share what you learned with your doctor. If your doctor won't discuss information you gathered, you might need to find a new one who will.

Adapted from The American Association of Retired People www.aarp.org