

Finding quality health information online

women's health west

FACT SHEET No.

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fact sheet

The internet can be a valuable source of health information, a quick way to find out more about health conditions, therapies, drugs or other products, medical and other health organisations and support services. You may even be able to find support online, for example bulletin boards or discussion lists for people affected by a particular health issue.

However, not all information available on the Internet is equally reliable or useful. This checklist explains some of the major pitfalls and risks of finding health information online, and tips on finding and using high-quality information.

Check information with your doctor or health provider.

Reading health information online should never take the place of consulting with your doctor or other health provider. It's a good idea to summarise and check health information you find online with your health provider.

Seek a second opinion if necessary.

If you went to the internet because you were unhappy with your health provider's diagnosis or treatment, seek a second opinion. Contact your local health centre or Division of General Practice (www.gp.org.au), or search the Community Directory on our website at www.whwest.org.au.

Don't self-diagnose.

Diagnosing a medical condition is complex. It is important to consult a professional, rather than diagnosing yourself based on information you find online. Remember, "google"-searching one symptom may come up with anything from a mild condition to a deadly illness.

Talk to your health provider before treating yourself, even with "natural remedies".

Prescribing treatment – whether drugs, "natural remedies" or other treatments – is also complex. For example, your medical history will need to be taken into account, herbs or drugs may interact badly with each other, and treatments may carry risks that are not adequately explained online.

Be cautious about buying products online.

Medical products offered for sale online may be fraudulent or unsafe, may come without risk information or adequate instructions, and may not meet Australian standards or even be legal to purchase here.

Watch out for "miracle" products, especially if they don't list ingredients and side effects.

If a treatment sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Watch for claims of "no risk" or that a product can cure all kinds of diseases, for unsubstantiated testimonials, and phrases like "scientific breakthrough", "secret formula" and "miracle cure".

Check if the creator of a website is easily identified and reputable.

Be wary of websites where you cannot easily see what person or organisation produced the content. If you haven't heard of the website creator, you could ask your local health centre or Divisions of General Practice.

Check if the site includes quality assurance information and references.

Websites should clearly explain their sources, including qualifications of any experts cited. Larger websites should also provide information about what processes are used to ensure the information meets a high quality standard.

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Check if the site creators can easily be contacted.

Be wary of organisations that do not seem to be easily contacted by email, phone, fax, or mail. If there are no contacts, toll free numbers or feedback lines, especially if there are products for sale, it may well be a scam.

Check if sponsors are involved, and assess whether they have influenced website content.

A website may discuss symptoms or conditions, but only offer one treatment, for example a "miracle drug", or it may not provide adequate information about risks. Many organisations rely on money from advertisers to provide services like websites. However, advertisements should be clearly separated from health information.

Check if information is provided about a privacy policy.

You need to be confident that any information you provide will be kept confidential. The last thing you may want is to see your private email quoted to advertise a product, or to be put on junk mail or spam lists.

Read information carefully, and check when it was updated.

There are plenty of websites containing information that is contradictory, out of date or wrong. High quality information should include the date it was published.

Assess whether subject coverage is complete, in depth and unbiased.

High quality sites should contain links to other reputable sites, focus on facts rather than opinion, and cover a wide range of topics in some depth. For example, in relation to a disease or condition, higher quality sites would include information about causes, prevention, diagnosis, treatment options and their risks and benefits.

Look for information written for consumers, rather than for health professionals.

Some health information sites are written for "consumers" or patients. Some are written for health professionals or scientists. Reading information written for heart surgeons, for example, can be confusing for people who may already feel anxious about their own or a friend or family member's health.

Assess how "user friendly" a site is.

Some sites make it really easy to find the information you want, and use clear language. Others may be frustrating for a variety of reasons: lots of images that slow your computer down, small font size, hard-to-follow navigation, jargon, or pop up ads that obscure the text.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Australian websites that provide more information about how to assess online health information.

- ◆ Better Health Channel – www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/
- ◆ Health Insite – www.healthinsite.gov.au/
- ◆ Therapeutic Goods Administration – www.tga.gov.au/

Selected sites containing high quality information which is commonly used by women in Australia:

- ◆ The Victorian Cancer Council – www.accv.org.au
- ◆ Jean Hailes Foundation www.jeanhailes.org.au
- ◆ Multicultural Mental Health Australia – www.mmha.org.au
- ◆ NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service – www.health.nsw.gov.au/health-public-affairs/mhcs/
- ◆ Choice (click through to the health section) www.choice.com.au
- ◆ Heart Foundation – www.heartfoundation.com.au
- ◆ Diabetes Australia – www.diabetesaustralia.com.au
- ◆ Family Planning Victoria – www.fpv.org.au

SOURCE: information drawn from Better Health Channel, Health Insite and the Therapeutic Goods Administration websites.