



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

How to Find Health Information You Can Trust

Anyone can post health information online. Not all information is true, so you should be careful about what to trust. This resource will help you know whether you can trust the information you find.

To help you decide if you can trust online health information, look for these warning signs:

- Claims of a “scientific breakthrough,” “miraculous cure,” “secret ingredient,” or “ancient remedy.”
- Claims that a product can cure a wide range of illnesses. No product can do that.
- Stories of people who had amazing results, but no clear scientific data.
- Claims that a product is available only from one company, especially if you must pay in advance.
- Claims of a “money-back” guarantee. While this may make the product seem risk-free, it’s often impossible to get your money back.
- Websites that don’t list the company’s name, street address, phone number, and other contact information. It may not have to follow U.S. laws and regulations.

Ask Yourself 5 Questions

Now you know some things that can tell you a website should not be trusted. It's also important to know what you should see any time you're looking at health information. Ask these 5 questions:

1. Who runs the website?
2. What is the purpose of the website?
3. Where does the information come from?
4. When was the information last updated?
5. Does the website ask for your personal information?

Who runs the website?

Any honest, health-related site should make it easy for you to find out who is responsible for the information on it. Often this can be found by clicking on "About Us." It can usually be found at the top or bottom of the site's main (home) page. You can get an idea about who runs a site by looking at the letters at the end of the URL address (see Figure 1). There are some websites that exist only to try and sell products and advertisements. These should be avoided as the information is often related to the products they are trying to sell.

Figure 1. Example of a URL address ending in .org

Figure 1. Example of a URL address ending in .org

What is the purpose of the website?

It's important to know the purpose of the site. It's usually related to who runs the site. In most cases, this information can be found by clicking on "About This Site" or "About Us." It's usually at the top or bottom of the main (home) page.

It's also helpful to know who the website is written for. It should clearly state

whether the health information is meant for consumers (anyone looking for information) or health professionals. Some sites have sections for each.

Use this table to understand the general purpose of information you find online.

Ending of the URL address	Source	Purpose
.edu	Means that the source of the information is part of an educational system (like a college or university)	Aims to educate the reader
.org	Usually means the source is a non-profit organization	Usually aims to educate the reader, but there can be some bias or prejudice in the information
.gov	Means the source is part of the national or state government	Aims to educate the reader
.com .biz .net	Usually means the site is run by a commercial (for-profit) or private source	Can aim to educate the reader or sell a product, but there may be some bias or prejudice in the information

Where does the information come from?

Is the information based on scientific facts, or is it based on opinions or personal experiences? Personal stories, often called blogs and testimonials, can be quite moving, but they may not apply to you. A few people saying they’ve done well on a certain treatment doesn’t mean that most people will. In fact, they may not even be true stories. Good information comes from research studies that are done on large groups of volunteers. They use careful methods to be sure the result reflects what is being tested.

When was the information last updated?

Health and medical information changes almost every day. The standard of care a few years ago may no longer be the standard of care today. Web pages should include the date the information was posted. If information is more than a few years old, you may want to look for recent information and compare it.

Does the website ask for your personal information?

Websites that exist only to help the reader understand health information should not ask for personal information. This includes your social security number, credit or debit card numbers, driver's license number, or date of birth. You should only give this kind of information when you have a trusted relationship with the website. You should be sure you are on a secure page. An example of a trusted relationship with a website is a patient portal. It is secure and contains your personal health information. Read *Your Guide to the Patient Portal* (https://sandbox18.mskcc.org/pe/patient_portal) to learn more about patient portals.

Key Points to Remember

- Ask your healthcare provider about any information you find. They can help you find out if it's true, or if it doesn't relate to a medical condition you have.
- Any website should make it easy for you to learn who owns the site and its information.
- For any information that was not written for the website, it should clearly identify the original source of the information.
- Any website that asks you for personal information should explain exactly what the site will and will not do with that information.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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