
Finding reliable health information

Summary

- You can find reliable health information at your doctor's surgery, pharmacies and community health centres.
 - Beware of medical information provided by organisations trying to sell a particular product or service – information written to sell products or services is not medical advice.
 - Some online health information is reliable.
 - Check who is providing the information and what they do to make sure it is accurate.
 - Facebook, online forums and chatrooms are not necessarily places for reliable medical information.
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Educating yourself about your health issues or medical conditions is an important part of managing your health. The best place to find health information is from healthcare professionals. Ask your doctor, pharmacist or allied health professional when you have medical questions.

You should ask questions of your healthcare team so that you can fully understand your options, as it is their job to explain your health conditions to you. While reliable health information can be found in pharmacies, doctors' clinics and community health centres, it can be difficult to find trusted medical information elsewhere.

Health information is readily available from reputable sources such as:

- health brochures in your local hospital, doctor's office or community health centre
- telephone helplines such as NURSE-ON-CALL or Directline
- your doctor or pharmacist
- reliable health information websites, such as government sites, condition-specific sites, support organisation sites, and medical journals.

Other information may not be as reliable as that from healthcare professionals. It is best to assess other sources of medical information with an open mind as they may be inaccurate. These include magazine or TV stories or ads, advice from family and friends, or websites that may be promoting a product.

Some healthcare products or treatments may say they are 'scientifically tested' but this does not mean they are 'scientifically proven'. If they do talk about health research, they should provide a link to the research information. Even then, the study may not be reputable. Only your healthcare professionals, such as your local doctor, can provide the most appropriate health advice.

Researching reliable health information online

Anyone can create a website, so there is no 'gatekeeper' to make sure that online health information is reliable. Working out which information is trustworthy is not always easy. As access to health research and evidence increases, so do the risks of misinterpreting it, and the chances of any one person getting a complete and balanced picture decreases.

When it comes to health and medical information, there are plenty of reliable sources available online through government-endorsed health websites (such as Better Health Channel), peak industry bodies (such as the Australian Medical Association) and peak condition-specific organisations (such as beyondblue and Cancer Council Victoria).

When searching for health information from less well-known online sources consider:

- The source of the information – understand who is providing or endorsing the content. The 'About us' page will tell you who runs the site – it may be a legitimate health organisation or an individual (such as someone who

has had experience with the illness and wants to share what they have learned).

- Quality control measures – does the site have an editorial board? Is the information reviewed by qualified experts before it is posted? This information should be available on the ‘About us’ page or something similar.
- A level of scepticism about online health products – if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Does it promise quick and easy results? Words like ‘secret ingredient’ should raise suspicions. If the provider is serious, they will be open about their products. Check if their claims are endorsed on more than one website.
- What is the evidence? – look for reputable medical research to back up claims. Do not trust testimonials from people you do not know – they may have been paid for their endorsement (or given free products or services).
- Is the information up to date? – check the date the information was posted or when the site was last updated (this is usually available at the bottom of the screen).
- Beware of bias – who is funding the website? What is its purpose? If the site is funded by a company that only recommends its own products, take this into consideration. Check if it has a particular philosophical bias that influences its advice.
- Is your privacy protected? – health information should be confidential. Beware of websites that ask for private information or share your details with others without your permission. Most reputable sites publish their privacy policy on the site.

Health support groups

Medical condition-focused support groups can increase your knowledge about your illness and help you learn to live more comfortably with it. They also allow you to connect with other people going through similar situations to you.

If you receive advice about medical treatments or providers through a support group (either online or in person), check with a healthcare professional you trust before starting on a new treatment regimen. Tell your doctor if you plan to stop the treatment they have prescribed and explain why. It is important that you understand any risks involved in stopping or changing a medical treatment.

Check who runs the group (including online groups). It might be a government healthcare organisation (such as the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre), a non-profit organisation (such as Alzheimer’s Australia) or someone who has experienced the condition (such as a patient or carer).

Be aware of support groups run by pharmaceutical companies – they may be using the group to promote their products exclusively. As well, be aware of any financial or religious ties that may influence a particular group’s attitude on things like treatments. Not all support groups will be part of a trusted health system.

This information can be difficult to find on some sites. If it isn’t included in sections of the website like About us, you could send the organisation an email or phone them up to find out the answers to your questions.

Difference between medical information and advertisements

Some health brochures and websites are written by pharmaceutical companies or other businesses looking to sell a product or service. While they can provide some information, they may only talk about the aspects of the condition that supports their product or service. Some, like unsolicited emails or ‘spam’, do not offer any information, instead promising fast or exceptional results from (often fake) medication that they want you to buy.

When reading information, see if they are recommending a service with a particular clinic or specific product. If they are, you may not be getting all the facts. Other danger signs include information that criticises medical staff and medication, use of anecdotes or testimonials instead of science-based proof, and claims to cure incurable diseases like AIDS or arthritis.

Reliable health information may be found in health and fitness-focused magazines that have quality control measures in place, and base their health advice on new studies and expert opinion. Many also make it clear what content is actually paid advertising (with headings like ‘advertising feature’) and what is content endorsed by the magazine. Check with your doctor before beginning any new treatment or health-related program.

Social media

While talking about medical issues online or with friends can provide emotional support, it is worth remembering when they are not qualified healthcare professionals and cannot always give reliable medical advice.

Someone may share the same medical issue as you, but they will have a different medical history. They will have different needs, so their medical treatment may not be the same as yours. Chatting with friends on social media sites like Facebook is no substitute for proper medical advice. Any suggested medical treatments should be discussed with your doctor.

If you have health or medical questions

Ask a doctor, pharmacist or community health centre if you have specific health or medical questions. Medical telephone helplines including the after-hours GP helpline or NURSE-ON-CALL can also be a quick way to find reliable medical information or discuss your health issues with a qualified healthcare professional

Where to get help

- Your doctor

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