
Health information and health products online

Summary

- Online health consumers should be wary because medical misinformation or 'cyberquackery' is rife.
 - Make sure the website is owned by a reputable organisation before you decide to trust its content.
 - Don't use online health information to self-diagnose – always see your doctor.
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Using the internet to find health and medical information can help you make more informed decisions about your health, but it is not a substitute for seeing a doctor. Although some health information available on the internet can be valuable, you need to be aware of the risks because medical misinformation or 'cyberquackery' is rife.

It is important to know how to recognise a reputable site. Watch out for scams or dodgy information and don't self-diagnose or self-medicate using online information. Always consult your doctor for proper diagnosis and treatment advice.

Why people seek health information online

A 2010 Nielsen study showed that searching for health and medical information was among the top 10 internet activities for online Australians over 16 years of age. We go online to find health information for a range of reasons, including to:

- Gather more information about a medically diagnosed disease or illness
- Find out about alternative medical treatments
- Get a 'second opinion'
- Seek support from other internet users who have the same kind of medical disease or illness (via 'chat rooms', online discussion forums, blogs or communities, or social media such as Facebook)
- Find relevant patient support groups or other healthcare services
- Resolve conflicting health information.

Around a quarter of all Australians regularly seek health information online. It is expected that this will increase as more people use the internet to supplement their doctor's advice. However, it seems that the vast majority of people still seek medical attention for diagnosis and information about prescription medication or for a referral.

The dangers of self-diagnosis

It is important not to use online health information to self-diagnose or self-medicate. Always see your doctor or another healthcare professional registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA).

Self-diagnosis using medical websites is always tricky, because the information provided tends to relate to specific medical conditions rather than your particular situation. For example, if you type the symptom 'stomach pain' into the search engine of a general health and medical website, it may offer gastritis, appendicitis, irritable bowel syndrome or gastroenteritis for further information.

It would be a mistake to consider these suggestions as diagnoses. Your stomach pain could be caused by a build up of gas following the baked beans and eggs you had for lunch, or it may indicate a life-threatening emergency.

Safety issues include:

- The diagnosis may be wrong.
 - Self-medication may delay your visit to the doctor and may mean you miss out on a proper diagnosis.
 - Without proper medical attention, you may not receive the appropriate treatment for your condition.
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- In the case of serious illness, a delay in medical treatment may cause serious complications or death.
- The treatment you choose may have unwanted side effects or interact with your other medications, treatments, alcohol or other drugs.

Be wary of online health and medical products

A huge range of health and medical products are sold online. It is very difficult to judge a good quality product from a poor one over the internet. Be cautious and consult with your doctor or healthcare professional before parting with your money.

While some products are available from reputable companies, others are marketed by unscrupulous people wanting to get rich from gullible online consumers. The product you purchase could be bogus, may contain harmful ingredients not shown on the label or may be unsuitable for your condition.

Finding a reliable health information website

Remember that this or any other checklist isn't foolproof. Generally speaking, you should ask yourself the following questions before deciding whether to trust the information presented on a medical website:

- Who is responsible for the content? Check whether the website is owned or sponsored by a reputable organisation. Every affiliation should be clearly shown on the home page or via a link from the home page.
- Look for credentials and qualifications. Be especially wary if the people responsible for the content are anonymous.
- Can you contact the owners of the website via email, telephone, fax, regular mail and street address? Be wary if the owners don't offer any means of communication.
- Are the sponsors directly influencing the content? Is the role of the sponsor(s) clearly outlined?
- Is the website trying to sell you products or services? If so, there may be a conflict of interest – for example, the website publishers could be wording their content in a way that is designed to encourage you to buy their product. Advertising should be clearly differentiated from information.
- Does the website have a disclaimer about protecting your personal health information and privacy?
- Is the health information consistent, or are there contradictions?
- Does the website provide information about both the benefits and risks of treatments or therapies? Do they discuss more than one option? Do they compare the costs and effectiveness of each treatment or therapy? Does each article include a list of references? Are the references from reputable organisations or publications?
- Is there a review process for the content? Are the clinical or scientific articles reviewed regularly by professionals in the field who are not directly employed by the website owners? Is the review process explained?
- Is the information recent and regularly updated? Is each article dated? Is the editorial process explained?

'User-friendly' health information

You should also find a health information website that is easy to use. If you encounter a poorly constructed website, you should look for alternative sources of information.

Questions you could ask yourself include:

- Does the website have a fancy 'bells and whistles' design that your computer can't accommodate or that simply doesn't work?
- Is the website difficult to navigate?
- Is the font too small to read, or is reading the text difficult because of a poorly chosen colour scheme?
- Are the articles badly written? For example, do the articles fail to explain the information in a logical and easy-to-understand way?
- Does the content rely too much on jargon?
- Are acronyms and jargon left unexplained?
- Does the website redirect you to another site that you didn't intend to visit?
- Do advertising banners constantly obscure the text?

Think about questions to ask your doctor

Using the internet to get better informed about your medical condition can help you decide what questions to ask your doctor. However, it is not a substitute for obtaining high-quality and reliable information from your doctor. Always see a doctor for diagnosis and treatment advice.

It is a good idea to discuss online health information you have found with your doctor or other healthcare professional. However, don't expect them to have enough time to read multiple pages of information.

Before you visit the doctor, you should:

- Summarise the information you found on the internet.
- Think about what you have learned and what concerns you have.
- Prepare a short list of specific questions to ask your doctor.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Other healthcare professionals
- Consumers Health Forum of Australia Tel. (02) 6273 5444

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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