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# How To Find Reliable Health Information Online

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Many older adults share a common concern: “Can I trust the health information I find online?” There are thousands of medical websites. Some provide up-to-date medical news and reliable health information, and some do not. Choosing trustworthy websites is an important step in gathering reliable health information.

## Where can I find reliable health information online?

The [National Institutes of Health](#) website is a good place to start for reliable health information. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) website is another one.

As a rule, health websites sponsored by federal government agencies are accurate sources of information. You can reach all federal websites by visiting [www.usa.gov](http://www.usa.gov). Medical

and health care organizations, hospitals, and academic medical institutions may also be reliable sources of health information.



Your health care provider can also suggest ideal sources of online information. If your doctor's office has a website, it may include a list of recommended links.

### MedlinePlus.gov

[MedlinePlus.gov](https://medlineplus.gov) is a website from the NIH National Library of Medicine that has dependable consumer health information on more than 1,000 health-related topics. Use its online tutorial to [learn how to evaluate health information online](#).

## Questions to ask before trusting a website

Searching online, you will likely find websites for multiple health organizations, including many you may not recognize. The following questions can help determine which ones are trustworthy. Many of the answers can often be found in a website's "About Us" section.

### 1. What is the purpose of the website, and who owns or sponsors it?

Why was the site created? Is the purpose of the site to inform or explain, or is it trying to sell a product or service? Understanding the motive of the website can help you better judge its content. The goal of any trustworthy health information website is to provide accurate, current, and useful information versus trying to make a sale.

Knowing who pays for a website may provide you with insight into the mission or goal of the site. For example, if a business pays for the site, the health information may favor that business and its products. Sometimes, the website address (called a URL) is helpful for identifying the type of agency or organization that owns the site. For example:

- **.gov** identifies a U.S. government agency
- **.edu** identifies an educational institution, such as a school, college, or university
- **.org** usually identifies nonprofit organizations, such as medical or research societies and advocacy groups
- **.com** identifies commercial websites, such as businesses and pharmaceutical companies

While many commercial websites do provide accurate, useful health information, it can be hard to distinguish this content from marketing and promotional materials in some cases. Any advertisements on a site should be clearly marked as such. Watch out for ads designed to look like neutral health information.

### 2. Who wrote the information? Who reviewed it?

Website pages often, but not always, identify the authors and contributors. If the author is listed, are they an expert in the field? Look for health care professionals or scientific researchers with in-depth knowledge of the topic. Does the author work for an organization and, if so, what are the goals of that organization? A contributor's connection to the website, and any financial stake they have regarding the information on the website, should be made clear.

If the material is not authored by an expert, has the information been reviewed by a health care professional or other credentialed specialist? Dependable health information websites will share sources and citations.

Trustworthy websites will also have contact information — an email address, phone number, and/or mailing address — that you can use to reach the site's sponsor. Look for this information at the bottom of web pages or in a separate "About Us" or "Contact Us" page.

Be cautious about testimonials, individual blogs, and posts on discussion boards. Personal stories may be helpful and comforting, but not everyone experiences health problems the same way. Also, there is a big difference between information written by a single person interested in a topic and a website developed by professionals using researched and peer-reviewed scientific evidence.

No online information, even if it is accurate and trustworthy, should replace seeing a health care professional who can thoroughly evaluate your unique situation and provide specific advice.

### 3. When was the information written and updated?

Look for websites that stay current with their health information. You don't want to make decisions about your care based on out-of-date content. Often, the date the information was created and reviewed or updated will appear at the bottom of the page. Pages on the same site may be updated at different times, and some may be updated more often than others. Older information isn't useless, but using the most current, evidence-based information is ideal.

### 4. Is your privacy protected? Does the website clearly state a privacy policy?

Read the website's privacy policy. It is usually at the bottom of the page or on a separate page titled "Privacy Policy" or "Our Policies." If a website says it uses "cookies," your information may not be private. Cookies are small text files that enable a website to collect and remember information about your visit. While cookies may enhance your web experience, they can also compromise your online privacy, so it is important to read about the information the website collects and how the organization will use it. Many websites will ask you ahead of time if you want to accept cookies, but others may not. If you are concerned about the potential use of information gathered by cookies, you can choose to disable the use of cookies through your internet browser settings.

### 5. How can I protect my health information?

If you are asked to share personal information, be sure to find out how the information will be used. Secure websites that collect personal information responsibly have an "s" after "http" in the start of their website addresses (https://) and often require that you create a username and password.

Be careful about sharing your [Social Security number](#). Find out why your number is needed, how it will be used, and what will happen if you do not share this information. Only enter your Social Security number on secure websites. You might consider calling your doctor's office or health insurance company to give this information over the phone rather than providing it online.

Taking these precautions may help protect your information:

- Beware of [health fraud scams](#) and pay attention when browsing the internet. Do not open unexpected links. Hover your mouse over a link to confirm that clicking it will take you to a reputable website.
- Always use a strong password. Include a variation of numbers, letters, and symbols. Some websites may allow you to use a phrase as well. Create a unique password for each website and change it frequently.
- Use two-factor authentication when you can. This security feature requires the use of two different types of personal information to log into your mobile devices or accounts.
- Don't enter sensitive information over public Wi-Fi. [Learn about how to safely use public Wi-Fi networks](#).
- Be careful about the information you share through social media sites. For example, don't share personal information, such as where you live or your contact information, on a public channel.

## Report Elder Fraud

Older adults are often the target of online scammers. One reason is that older people are less likely to report suspected fraud. If you believe an older adult in your life has been the target of a scam, contact the [National Elder Fraud Hotline](#) at 833-372-8311.

## 6. Does the website offer quick and easy solutions to your health problems? Does it promise miracle cures?

Be cautious about websites claiming any single remedy will cure many different illnesses. Also be wary of sites suggesting simple or unproven treatments for a disease. Question dramatic writing or promises of cures that seem too good to be true and look for other websites with the same information. Even if a website links to a trustworthy source, it doesn't mean that the site has the other organization's endorsement or support.

## Checklist: Finding Reliable Health Information Online

Use the following checklist to help ensure the health information you are reading online can be trusted. You might want to keep this checklist by your computer.

- Why was the site created? Is the mission or goal of the website owner or sponsor made clear?
- Is the website owner or sponsor a federal agency, medical school, hospital, or large professional or nonprofit organization, or is it related to one of these?
- Is the website written by a medical or scientific professional or does it reference one of the trustworthy sources mentioned above for its health information? Does the site offer contact information?
- When was the information written and last updated?
- Is your privacy protected? Is the website secure?
- Does the website offer quick and easy solutions to resolving health problems?

## Health and medical apps

Mobile medical applications ("apps") are a type of software you can install and run on your smartphone. Medical apps can support your health in many ways. For example, they can help track your eating habits or physical activity, access test results from a lab, or monitor a health condition. They can also provide helpful reminders to exercise or take medications. But anyone can develop a health app — for any reason — and apps may include inaccurate or misleading information. Before you download or use an app, make sure you know who produced it.

When you download an app, it may ask for your location, your email, or other personal information. Apps may also collect data about you as you use them. Ensure the information collected is relevant to the app, you know how the information will be used, and you feel comfortable sharing this information. Responsible app developers will make this information readily available before you download it.

## Social media, health news, and health books

Social media websites and apps are online communities through which people can connect with friends, family, and strangers. Social media is one way people share health information and news stories with each other. Some of this information may be true, but too often some of it is not. Recognize that just because a post is from a friend or

colleague, it does not necessarily mean that the information is accurate, complete, or applicable to your health. Check the source of the information, and make sure the original author is credible. Fact-checking websites can also help you determine if a story is reliable.

Evaluating health information in books is similar to finding reliable information on websites or on social media. Make sure to check who wrote the book, how current the information is, and where the content came from. When in doubt, ask your health care provider about what you read.

## Trust yourself and talk with your doctor

Use your good judgment when gathering health information online. There are websites on nearly every health topic, and many have no rules for overseeing the quality of the information provided. Use the information you find online as one tool to become more informed. Don't count on any one website and check your sources. Discuss what you find with your doctor before making any changes to your health care.

## You may also be interested in

- Getting [tips for discussing health decisions with your doctor](#)
- Reading about [how to prepare for a doctor's appointment](#)
- Learning more about [elder abuse](#), including financial abuse, scams, and fraud

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## For more information about reliable health information websites

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

800-232-4636

888-232-6348 (TTY)

[cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

### MedlinePlus

National Library of Medicine

[www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov)

### Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP)

240-453-8280

[odphpinfo@hhs.gov](mailto:odphpinfo@hhs.gov)

<https://health.gov/>

**USA.gov**

844-872-4681

[www.usa.gov](http://www.usa.gov)

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