Health Information on the Internet

Many people look for health information on the Internet. Doing a quick search in a search engine like Google may give you lots of information, but it may not be the best information. The quality of the information on the Internet varies. Anyone can set up a website. Some sites are reliable and others aren’t.

You need to decide what is helpful and what isn’t.
As a starting point, this pamphlet gives a list of some reliable sources.

The Internet can be helpful, but it should never replace your relationships with your healthcare providers. They are the experts.

This pamphlet is just a guide. If you have questions, please talk to your healthcare providers. We are here to help you.
The questions that follow can help you decide if a health-related website is reliable or can be trusted. You should be able to answer yes to the questions. If not, you may want to check other websites for more trustworthy information.

Even if you can answer yes to these questions, it doesn’t mean that the information on the site is accurate and unbiased. These questions are a guide, but they can’t cover everything.

- Did a healthcare professional write the information?
  › The site should show the names, training, and qualifications of the authors or the name of the organization responsible for the information. If a university, government, or professional society wrote the information, this is usually a good sign.

- If the author is not a healthcare professional, do they explain their interest in the subject (for example, “I’m a cancer survivor”)?
  › Information may be about a personal experience. The diagnosis or treatment may not apply, the symptoms you are experiencing, or your own situation.
• Is there a way to contact the people who run the website, such as a “Contact Us” link?
  › You should be able to contact the author of any website. If you can’t, this may be a sign of a unreliable source.

• Is the purpose of the website clear? Some websites give information and others may be trying to sell something.
  › If the site is selling a product, it will say that the product is great, whether it is or not.

• Does it say who pays for the website?
  › Any organization that has given money, services, or materials should be listed. A company that gives financial help to a site may influence the site’s information. If there is advertising on the site, there should be a good reason for it, and it should be explained by the site’s owner. Check for an advertising policy.
• **Was the website updated recently?**
  › Websites should be up to date and the date of the last update should be listed. Look at the top and bottom of each article to see if there is a date when it was posted. Look at the bottom of any page on the site to see if there was an update. If the site was updated within the last six months or so, this is a good sign.

• **Is your privacy protected?**
  › The website should state its policy about what information it collects. Be careful if you are asked to share personal information. It is a good sign if the site says they do not use cookies. Cookies track your computer around the Internet.

• **Is there Canadian information?**
  › This means that the site is more relevant to you than ones created in other countries where the healthcare systems may be different.
Some things to think about

• There should be a policy or process about how materials are created or checked. They may be reviewed by an editorial board or experts in the field. Look for some mention of this.

• References should be available to support the information. It should be clear where the information came from (for example, another website or healthcare experts).

• The international organization “Health on the Net Foundation” gives basic principles for health-related websites to follow. Members showing the “HONcode” symbol are committed to observing these principles. The HONcode symbol is not an award and does not rate the quality of the information on a website.

  › Look on the bottom of the main web page (often called “Home”) for the HONcode symbol. You can learn more about the HON Code of Conduct for health websites at www.hon.ch/HONcode/index.html.

• The information on Facebook groups and pages, discussion groups, chat rooms, and personal blogs is often just opinion. If the writers are healthcare professionals, they will say so and will clearly explain their backgrounds.
• Beware of websites that attack modern medicine.
• Beware of websites that are selling something.
• Legitimate websites include well-known hospitals, professional associations, governments, nonprofit organizations, and universities.

Notes:
Good starting points for online health information:

Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA) patient education guides
  • http://library.nshealth.ca/PatientGuides
    › Includes a collection of hundreds of patient information pamphlets created by NSHA staff

NSHA Hospital Library Services catalogue
  • http://libcat.nshealth.ca
    › Search for books and more

IWK Health Centre
  • www.iwk.nshealth.ca
    › The IWK has many resources including patient pamphlets about women’s health, pregnancy, newborn care, child and teen health, and mental health

Nova Scotia Public Libraries
  • https://novascotia.overdrive.com
    › Try searching for “health”
    › Ask at your local library branch

Halifax Public Libraries searchable health databases
  • www.halifaxpubliclibraries.ca/research/topics/health.html
About Kids Health
• www.aboutkidshealth.ca
  › Information from the Hospital for Sick Children. Information is available in multiple languages and includes health resources and games created for kids

Doctors Nova Scotia
• www.doctorsns.com
  › Doctors Nova Scotia provides up-to-date information on healthy living, illnesses, diseases, and other health-related matters

Hamilton Health Sciences Patient Education Library
• www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/body.cfm?id=1486
  › A collection of patient information pamphlets created for patients and families

Healthy Living
• www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/alpha-eng.php
  › This is part of the Health Canada website. Health-related topics are listed in alphabetical order

McGill University Health Centre - Patient Education Office
• http://infotheque.muhc.ca
  › This website offers Canadian information and also gives links to other sites
MedlinePlus
- http://medlineplus.gov
  › This site is funded by the U.S. National Library of Medicine. It is patient-focused and has a medical dictionary

NIH SeniorHealth
- http://nihseniorhealth.gov
  › This website gives general health and wellness information for older adults. The site lets you make text size bigger and have text read out loud

Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness
- http://novascotia.ca/DHW
  › This website gives details on MSI, wait times, and provincial programs (such as mental health and continuing care)

Public Health Agency of Canada
- www.phac-aspc.gc.ca
  › This site gives information on diseases and immunizations, as well as public health and travel health notices

Finding health information on the Internet is never a substitute for visiting and talking to your healthcare professionals, but it can be useful for starting a discussion with them.