

# Tips for Acquiring Online Health Information

## Introduction

If you have ever used a search engine to find out more information about a health-related topic, you know there are thousands of health-related websites on the internet. Much of this information is reliable and trustworthy; however, much of it is not. Even some of the information that was relevant is now no longer current. Knowing how to choose which website to trust is important when dealing with your health.



## Suggestions for finding health information online

The “home page” is the main page of a website. The home page should tell you the sponsor of the website as well as the contents or information you will find. The easiest way to know if the information on the Internet is trustworthy is to know the source.

Your state’s Cooperative Extension Service is a good place to start when looking for health information. The University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service webpage is [www.uaex.edu](http://www.uaex.edu) .

In general, health websites sponsored by the U.S. government are good sources of health information. You can reach all federal websites by visiting [www.usa.gov](http://www.usa.gov). For example, an excellent source of reliable and relevant information for health-related issues is the National Institutes of Health at [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov) .

Large professional organizations (such as the Arthritis Foundation, [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org) ) and well-known medical schools (such as the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, [www.uams.edu](http://www.uams.edu) ) may also be good sources of health information.

## What to look for

1. *Who sponsors the website? Can you easily identify the sponsor?*

Websites cost money—is the funding source readily apparent? Sometimes the website address itself may help—for example:

- ✓ [.gov](#) identifies a government agency
- ✓ [.edu](#) identifies an educational institution
- ✓ [.org](#) identifies professional organizations (e.g., scientific or research societies, advocacy groups)
- ✓ [.com](#) identifies commercial websites (e.g., businesses, pharmaceutical companies, sometimes hospitals)

2. *Is it obvious how you can reach the sponsor?*

Trustworthy websites will have contact information for you to use. For example, the website should list an e-mail address, phone number, or a mailing address where the sponsor and/or the authors of the information can be reached.

3. *Who wrote the information?*

Authors and contributors should be identified. Any financial interest in the content of the webpage should also be clear. There is a big difference between a website developed by a person with a financial interest in a topic versus a website developed using strong scientific evidence. Reliable health information comes from scientific research that has been conducted in government, university, or private laboratories.

4. *Who reviews the information? Does the website have an editorial board?*

If you want to check to see if there is an editorial board, try clicking on the “About Us” page or something similar (such as “About our Writers”) to see if the information is reviewed before it is placed online. Dependable websites will tell you where the health information came from and how it has been reviewed.

5. *When was the information written?*

Look carefully on the home page to find out when the website was last updated. The date is often found at the bottom of the home page. As medical advances and new research emerge, the recommendations change. Just note, not all older information is bad; there is much general health information that is tried and true and doesn't change.

6. *Is your privacy protected? Does the website clearly state a privacy policy?*

Be aware of fraud on the Internet. If you are asked for personal information, be sure to find out how the information is being used by contacting the website sponsor by phone, mail, or the “Contact Us” feature on the website. As a general rule, never give your Social Security number on the Internet.

7. *Does the website make claims that seem too good to be true?*

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. See if you can find other websites that give the same information.

## **In Summary**

Use good judgment and common sense when evaluating health information online. There are websites on nearly every conceivable health topic and no rules overseeing the quality of the information posted on the Internet. And most importantly, talk to your doctor.

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