

sorting out conflicting health advice



WITH THE NEWS, WEB AND OTHER SOURCES, THERE IS AN OVERLOAD OF HEALTH INFORMATION By Julie Jacobs

Butter or margarine? Whichever one you use, chances are your choice was influenced by health information you gleaned from the news, your doctors and/or the Internet. It seems the media has proffered the benefits of butter at one moment and margarine the next.*

There is indeed a plethora of health advice for consumers to digest, much of it often conflicting. One study commissioned by the Cornell Nutrition Information Center found that, at least nutrition-wise, most Americans respond to continuous conflicting health news by changing their eating habits over and over again, a pattern that can prove detrimental.

So, where should you go for the best health information and how do you sort out differing opinions? Fortunately, experts are pretty much in agreement on the answers.

WHERE TO ACCESS INFORMATION

With a computer in nearly every home, many people fact-find on the Internet, where there are literally hundreds of thousands of health-related Web sites. While they may make a person better informed to ask questions of their physicians, they also can heighten confusion.

"The Internet offers a lot of valuable information, but it

also includes a lot of inaccuracies and can cause unnecessary worry," says John Vigorita, MD, attending pediatrician and vice president of the Medical Staff at Overlook Hospital.

Adds Gary Kaye, MD, assistant chair of Overlook's department of obstetrics and gynecology, "Many of the sites may look good, but they offer erroneous information and it's hard for the consumer to differentiate between what's right and wrong."

The key when using the Internet is to explore numerous sites and to remember that every person's case is individual. Reputable consumer health advice is guaranteed from professional organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Heart Association, as well as government agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. According to Kathy Moeller, MLS, AHIP, manager of library and continuing medical education services at Overlook, if there is extensive advertising on a site, its producer may be more concerned with increased revenue than accurate reporting.

University medical centers also may be worth a visit, especially those that are renowned for their expertise in certain areas including cancer and cardiovascular disease.

The best way to begin making sense of conflicting advice is to speak with your primary care or family doctor. He or she knows your health history and should be entrusted to help you in your medical decision-making.