

# INTERNET *Health*



## A PRIMER ON THE SAFE WAY TO LOG IN & LEARN

**W**e've all done it. A few aches and pains and we're off to cyberspace in search of answers to what ails us. But with no supreme authority patrolling the information superhighway, in whose wisdom and advice should we trust?

According to The Royal Society of Medicine's Health Information on the Internet, there currently are some 100,000 websites outlining the symptoms, risk factors and treatments for a whole host of illnesses, diseases and conditions. Although many of these sites are managed by reputable institutions and organizations, others are independently authored with no fact-checking support. Knowing where to find accurate online data and how to discern fact from half-truths is critical to health care consumers making the best medical decisions.

### Recognizing Reputable Sites

The key to finding dependable information is to always consider the source. Government agencies (like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health), research and educational facilities (such as The Rockefeller University and Johns Hopkins Medicine), and professional health care associations (including the American Medical Association and the American Cancer Society) are all a sure bet for reliable, current news. The URLs for these bodies generally contain the suffixes .gov, .edu and .org, respectively.

While many .com sites are links to commercial entities, some will lead you to well-known, established resources—the Mayo Clinic and WebMD among them. Still, once you've connected to any site, make sure to check out the "About Us" section and look for contact information. Note whether the site is affiliated with well-known

organizations or government groups, if it lists advisors or consultants, and whether it offers articles and insights by experts in the field. When the site's sponsor and contact information are hard to locate, you might want to think twice before relying on what you read.

### Checking Information Validity

A good way to ensure the truthfulness of Internet health information is to compare what's featured on one site with that on several other sites. If you're researching a medical condition on the National Institutes of Health website, for example, you'll find similar information when visiting the Mayo Clinic online. Be mindful when you come across something that seems too good to be true and cannot be confirmed elsewhere—chances are it is misleading or incorrect.

Reputable sites typically cite the original sources of their postings. They also provide references to medical facts and figures, and include the credentials of their reporters, all of which you can verify.

### Finding Timely Reports

With research findings and treatment advances always on the horizon, the medical landscape is constantly changing—so logging on to a site with old news can be bad news. A worthwhile site usually dates its postings and keeps them current. As a health care consumer, you want to access the most up-to-date medical information available.

### What Else You Should Know

Some health-related sites offer more than information, articles, tips and advice—like product promotions and chat rooms—and such extras may be more harmful than helpful. Be wary of any call to action to purchase medications and equipment or forward personal information, particularly if you're unfamiliar with the site's sponsor. And when participating in chat rooms and other online health forums, read the terms of use for the service and look to see who moderates it. Remember that the sources are often not medical experts, but other individuals sharing their own experiences.

Whatever health information you find, it's important to discuss it with your physician, who is knowledgeable about you and your medical history, and who can explain complex subjects in layman's terms. ▲

For more information: [cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov), [ehow.com](http://ehow.com), [mlanet.org](http://mlanet.org), [rsm.ac.uk](http://rsm.ac.uk)

### Helpful Health Sites

- [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) (National Cancer Institute)
- [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [www.familydoctor.org](http://www.familydoctor.org) (American Academy of Family Physicians)
- [www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services)
- [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org) (The Nemours Foundation)
- [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com) (Mayo Clinic)
- [www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov) (U.S. National Library of Medicine)
- [www.noah-health.org](http://www.noah-health.org) (New York Online Access to Health)
- [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com) (WebMD)

