



CONSULTANTS IN MEDICAL ONCOLOGY AND HEMATOLOGY, PC

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Using the Internet for Health and Medical Information

Using the Internet has made finding health information easier and faster. Much of the information on the Internet is valuable; however, the Internet also allows rapid and widespread distribution of false and misleading information. Unfortunately, a lot of what passes for cancer or health information on the Internet is made up of opinion, salesmanship, testimonials, and biased information that is not grounded in science. It may take some extra time and effort, but you need to find accurate information. The wrong information can hurt you when it comes to cancer and your health. You should carefully consider the source of information you find on the Internet and discuss that information with your health care provider. **Always remember that the information found on the Internet should not take the place of medical advice.** This fact sheet can help you decide whether the health information you find on the Internet or receive by e-mail is likely to be reliable.

How can I be sure that what I read on the Web is true? In many cases, there is not a simple way to be sure. The list of questions below is adapted from a list developed by the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Ask these questions when trying to decide if you can trust a source of cancer information. The answers should be easy to find on the Web site itself.

Who runs this Web site? Who pays for it?

Is the site run or paid for by an individual or by an organization? What type of organization, business, government agency, or non-profit organization? Any honest, health-related site should make it easy for you to find out who is responsible for the information on it. Often this can be found by clicking on “About Us” which can usually be found at the top or bottom of the site’s main (home) page. You can get an idea about who runs a site by looking at the letters at the end of the URL address.

Does the URL include: **edu, .com, .org, .gov.**

- .edu** means the source of the information is part of an educational system (college or university)
- .org** usually means that the source is a non-profit organization
- .gov** means the source is a part of a national or state government
- .com** usually means the site is run by a commercial (for-profit) or private source

In the US, the most reliable sources of health information tend to be government agencies, hospitals, universities, and major public health and health advocacy organizations, such as the American Cancer Society. These groups use information that is reviewed by noted experts and updated often. If the site is full of ads or is supported or funded by an outside company, it is important to ask yourself whether the information there might be slanted in some way. This is not always the case, but it should make you more cautious.

What is the purpose or mission of this Web site?

This is usually related to who runs the site. It is important to know the mission or purpose of the site. The source of information should make this clear. Often this can be found by clicking on “About This Site” or “About Us”, which can usually be found at the top or bottom of the main (home) page. Again, Web sites designed to sell products may be more likely to have slanted or inaccurate health information than sites designed to simply provide information. Some sites try to do both, but you should look at these carefully, too. Remember that if a Web site’s main purpose is to sell products, it will only contain the information the seller wants you to read.

Who is the Web site written for?

Some health information Web sites have 2 different areas, one for patients or consumers and one for health professionals. The site should be designed so that you can choose the patient version for information written without large amounts of medical language.

What is the source of information on this Web site? Can you tell from where the information came?

Is it based on scientific facts, or is it based on opinions or personal experiences?

Personal stories, often called testimonials, may be quite moving, but they may not apply to you. Good information comes from studies that are done on large groups of volunteers, using careful methods to be sure that the result actually reflects what is being tested. Testimonials can be informative, but they usually cannot be checked for accuracy. More reputable Web sites will list references from scientific journals that support the information they give you. Information should be unbiased and balanced, giving the benefits and risks of a subject or treatment.

How is the information reviewed? Who writes or reviews it?

Does the site tell you how the information is reviewed to be sure it is correct? Is the information reviewed by experts in the field? How often is it reviewed? Who writes the material on the site? Try to identify the authors and their credentials.

How current is the information? How often is the information updated?

Information about health and treatment changes frequently. What may have been the usual treatment a few years ago may no longer be the standard of care today. Web pages should include the date the information was posted.

How does this Web site choose links to other sites?

Most reliable Web sites have a policy about putting up links to other sites. If the site gives links to other sites, are the links to trustworthy sites? Are the linked sites selling products or services? Is it clear when you are leaving the original site?

Can you look up cancer information without giving any personal information?

The site's privacy policy (usually linked from the top or bottom of the site's home page) should be easy to find and clearly explained. Some Web sites may automatically place you on email lists, or even sell your information to other organizations or companies. Know where your information may be going before giving it out. **Information like your social security number, credit or debit card numbers, driver's license number, date of birth, or mother's maiden name should NEVER be requested on Web sites that exist only for health information.**

Health On the Net Foundation (HON): <http://www.hon.ch/>

HON is an organization based in Switzerland whose mission is to guide people to useful and reliable online medical and health information. To be allowed to display the HON logo, the Web sites must agree to follow an ethical code of conduct. The HON code tries to improve the quality of medical information on the Internet through some basic principles which cover things like authorship, documentation of materials, and sponsorship of the site. For more information, visit the HON Web site.

Online support groups, mailing lists, and chat rooms

Online support groups are groups of people who share information and support over the Internet through chat rooms, discussion boards, or mailing lists. Some people may find online support groups helpful. It may be comforting to share your experiences with other people who are facing the same things you are. While helpful, these places may not be the best sources of health information. Any information you receive should be discussed with your health care team to see if it applies to your situation. The American Cancer Society's Cancer Survivors Network (CSN) is an online community created by and for cancer survivors and their families to share their cancer-related experiences, support one another, and exchange practical tips learned while living with the challenges of cancer. It's available online at <http://csn.cancer.org>.

Some of the many reliable Internet sources of health information:

American Cancer Society (<http://www.cancer.org/>)

National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) for patients (www.nccn.org/patients/)

Mayo Clinic (MayoClinic.com)

Caregiver Guide- Mayo clinic (mayoclinic.com/health/garegivers)

National Institutes of Health (nih.gov)

Cleveland Clinic - Health Information (clevelandclinic.org/health)

Health NIH (health.nih.gov)

Clinical Trials - Government and Private (clinicaltrial.gov)

American Society of Clinical Oncology (asco.com)

Cancer Net (www.cancer.net)

National Institute on Aging (nia.nih.gov)

National Health Information Center (www.healthfinder.gov)

Medline Plus: a service of National Institutes of Health (nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus)

The Food and Nutrition Information Center (fnic.nal.usda.gov)

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) <http://www.fda.gov>