Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

How To Find Health Information You Can Trust

Anyone can post health information online. Not all information is true, so you should be careful about what to trust. This resource will help you know if you can trust the information you find.

Look for these warning signs to help you decide if you can trust online health information:

- Claims of a “scientific breakthrough,” “miracle cure,” “secret ingredient,” or “ancient remedy.”
- Claims that a product can cure lots of different illnesses. No product can do that.
- Stories of people who had amazing results, but no clear scientific data.
- Claims that you can only get a product from one company, especially if you must pay in advance.
- Claims of a “money-back” guarantee. This may make the product seem risk-free, but it’s often impossible to get your money back.
- Websites that don’t list the company’s name, street address, phone number, and other contact information. The company may not have to follow U.S. laws and regulations.

If you see any of these, it’s a sign you should not trust the information.

Ask yourself 5 questions

Now you know some things that can tell you not to trust a website. It's also important to know what you should see any time you're looking at health information. Ask these 5 questions:

1. Who runs the website?
2. What is the website's purpose?
3. Where does the information come from?
4. When was the information last updated?
5. Does the website ask for your personal information?

Who runs the website?

Any honest, health-related website should make it easy to find out who is responsible for the site's information. Often, you can find this by clicking "About Us." You can usually find the "About Us" link at the top or bottom of the site's main (home) page.

What is the website's purpose?

It's important to know the website's purpose. It's usually related to who runs the site. In most cases, you can find this information by clicking "About This Site" or "About Us." These links are usually at the top or bottom of the main (home) page.

It's also helpful to know who the website is written for. The site should clearly say if the health information is meant for consumers (anyone looking for information) or health professionals. Some websites have sections for each.

The letters at the end of the URL address can also help you know a website's purpose (see Figure 1). Some websites exist only to try and sell products and ads. It's best to avoid these if you're looking for health information. The information on those websites is often related to the products they are trying to sell.

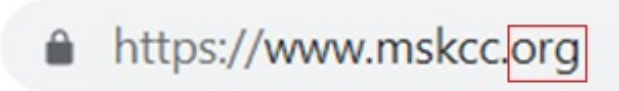


Figure 1. Example of a URL address ending in .org

Use this table to understand the general purpose of information you find online.

Ending of the URL address	Source	Purpose
.edu	Means the source of the information is part of an educational system, such as a college or university.	Aims to help the reader learn.
.org	Usually means the source is a non-profit organization.	Usually aims to help the reader learn. The information may have some bias or prejudice.
.gov	Means the source is part of the national or state government.	Aims to help the reader learn.
.com .biz .net	Usually means a commercial (for-profit) or private source runs the website.	Can aim to help the reader learn or sell a product. The information may have some bias or prejudice.

Where does the information come from?

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

Personal stories, often called blogs or testimonials, can be quite moving, but they may not apply to you. A few people saying they've done well on a certain treatment doesn't mean most people will. In fact, the stories may not even be true.

Good information comes from research studies that are done on large groups of volunteers. They use careful methods to be sure the result reflects what is

being tested.

When was the information last updated?

Health and medical information changes almost every day. The standard of care a few years ago may no longer be the standard of care today. Standard of care means the accepted, widely used treatment for an illness or medical condition.

Web pages should include the date the information was posted. If information is more than a few years old, you may want to look for recent information and compare it.

Does the website ask for your personal information?

Personal information includes your social security number, credit or debit card numbers, driver's license number, and date of birth.

Websites that exist only to help the reader understand health information should not ask for personal information.

Only give your personal information when you have a trusted relationship with the website. You should be sure you are on a secure page. The website should also tell you what it will and will not do with your information.

An example of a trusted relationship with a website is a patient portal. It is secure and has your personal health information. Read *Your Guide to the Patient Portal* (www.mskcc.org/pe/patient_portal) to learn more about patient portals.

Key points to remember

- Ask your healthcare provider about any information you find. They can help you find out if it's true, or if it doesn't relate to a medical condition you have.
- Any website should make it easy for you to learn who owns the site and its information.
- For any information that was not written for the website, it should clearly identify the original source of the information.
- Any website that asks for your personal information should explain exactly

what it will and will not do with that information.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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