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How to find reliable health information online

Have you ever felt a twinge somewhere or experienced an unusual symptom and gone online to find out what could be causing it? If you have, you're not alone. But with such an abundance of content available at our fingertips, how can you be sure that what you're reading online is accurate and safe?

According to a [recent survey](#), nearly two thirds of Brits use 'Dr Google' to self-diagnose before getting advice from a medical professional. In the COVID-19 era, there is a constant deluge of scientific information in the public domain, on every platform and in every format. Such knowledge can undoubtedly be empowering, helping us to make important decisions about our health. But if the information we're absorbing is inaccurate, it can also be harmful.

Searching online

People use the internet to look for all manner of information relating to their health. You could be wanting to learn more about a condition, research treatment options, look for support groups, find clinics or book appointments. You might also just want to keep abreast of the latest COVID-19 news and developments.

Whatever you're looking for, it can be really tough to navigate your way around the internet and find the right answers.

According to Dan Wills from the Patient Information Forum (PIF) – an independent, not-for-profit organisation aiming to improve access to high-quality health information – it's important to know where to look online.

"With more people using the internet to find health information and make decisions about their health and treatment options, they need trustworthy information to base their decisions on," he says. "The internet can be both great and terrible and knowing where to go could have a big impact on the treatment or support people seek."

Peer-reviewed?

A good place to start is to look to see if there is a robust peer-review process. For instance, all the patient information leaflets on Patient.info are written by GPs (or occasionally hospital specialists for highly specialised conditions) and peer reviewed by another GP. Only when both doctors agree the content is entirely clinically accurate are they released. Even our editorials, such as this one, are all peer-reviewed by a UK GP before they're released. Details of all our authors are freely available on the site.

Our videos go through the same process. They're all presented by specialists in their field - GPs, consultants, chartered physiotherapists - and are all peer-reviewed and approved before release.

This means you can be sure that all the information is in line with best medical practice in the UK.

Uptick-or-equivalent?

You can also look for [the PIF Tick](#). Launched earlier this year, the PIF Tick is a UK-wide quality mark for health information, enabling NHS organisations, health charities and companies to demonstrate that the health information they create and publish meets certain criteria. For example, the information should be:

- Clear
- Accurate
- Impartial
- Evidence-based
- Up to date
- Regularly reviewed

To date, 50 organisations have signed up and meet the standards required to bear the Tick on publications and websites. However, if a website doesn't show the PIF Tick logo, it doesn't necessarily mean the information it publishes is untrustworthy.

Review what you're reading

If you're not used to poring through hefty scientific literature like peer-reviewed journals and medical papers, there are some simple checks you can do to assess whether the information you're absorbing is likely to be of a similar high standard.

When was it published?

Information that was accurate a few years or even months ago might now be out of date, and medical advice changes to reflect that. Check the date of the material to see how recently it was published.

Many sources of consumer health information will include both a publication date and a review date, showing that the publisher reviews its content to ensure it's kept up to date.

Also look within the article to see whether updates have been made. For instance, on Patient.info all our patient leaflets are checked regularly to see if medical practice has changed significantly. If there's been a major change in guidance, such as an [update from NICE](#), the whole leaflet will be updated. But if only one area relating to the condition has changed, we add 'Editor's Notes' which include the latest guidance.

Who has written or published it?

Think about whether the author or publisher has an agenda in sharing the information. They might be trying to promote or sell something, in which case there's a chance it contains bias. If the information is sponsored, it's less likely to be impartial.

The health information on Patient's pages is produced [following robust procedures](#) to make sure it's accurate, up to date and trustworthy, and reflects reliable research evidence, recognised UK and European medical guidelines and best clinical practice.

Elsewhere, and as a general rule, the most reliable websites for health information are well-known health charities (look for website addresses ending in org.uk), the NHS, and government sites (those that end in gov.uk).

Is it relevant to me?

Check that the information applies to you and is relevant to your circumstances. Two people with the same long-condition won't necessarily have the same experiences, so balance whether the information is based on someone's opinion or if it's stating facts, and whether advice it gives reflects that.

Bear in mind, too, that if it's not a UK website, the information might have been intended for a specific overseas audience and therefore, might not be applicable in the UK.

Does it cite evidence sources?

Good-quality health information will bear the sources of evidence used to produce it - or at least state where the website lists those sources. Failing that, if it's based on scientific evidence, you should be able to cross-check the information to verify it.

Is it well written?

This might seem like a 'how long is a piece of string?' question, but it's an important clue as to the quality of the information. "Clear errors in grammar or spelling in the information are a red flag," Wills says. "If it's over-complicating the facts and not written clearly, this tends to highlight that it's not trustworthy or not intended for general information and could be taken from a larger document and out of context."

How reliable are scientific studies?

From symptom studies and vaccine trials to data about the spread of the virus, during the global pandemic we've been exposed to more scientific information than ever before - and it can be difficult to know what to make of all this data.

In considering how reliable a study's findings are, it helps to know what sort of research it is and how it was conducted. The first thing to look at is the size of the study, and how many participants it included. Generally, the more participants there were, the stronger its findings. However, it's worth bearing in mind that a 'large study' for a common condition like [heart attack](#) would be in the many thousands, whereas for an uncommon condition - say, [achalasia](#) - it might only be a couple of hundred.

The highest-quality results will come from 'double blind randomised' studies, where participants have been assigned to the different groups in the study entirely randomly, and neither the participants nor the researchers know which group each person is in.

For example, if a study aims to assess how effective a drug is, the researchers compare it against a placebo or another medicine currently used to treat that condition (called an active comparator) and the participants are placed into a group that receives either the drug or the placebo/active comparator.

It's important that participants are selected randomly to each group, so other factors don't influence the results, and that participants and researchers are 'blind' to which group is receiving the drug and which, the placebo. This eliminates any bias on the part of the researchers.

Finally, like all high-quality information, strong research will be peer-reviewed, meaning that other scientists and researchers have reviewed the study, assessed its strengths and weaknesses, and concur with its findings.

If you're not sure ...

Living through a global pandemic can be tough on us all, and especially so if you or a loved-one have a health condition. So it's understandable if looking for information online leaves you feeling overwhelmed.

Remember that you can still rely on your GP and local pharmacist, so do ask them if you have any questions and, most importantly, follow any advice they give you.

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Last updated by: Allie Anderson 28/12/2020	
Peer reviewed by: Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP 28/12/2020	

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