

WEB EXCLUSIVES

At Diagnosis: Cancer Information Online

Finding reliable information on the Internet starts by knowing what to look for

For many people, the Internet has become the first point of reference for important information, as it provides instant access to almost any topic. The Pew Internet Project's "Online Health Search 2006" report found that 80 percent of American Internet users, or about 113 million adults, have searched for health information online.

There is a vast amount of information about cancer on the Internet, and this information can help you make decisions about your illness and treatment. On many websites you can find basic facts about specific types of cancer, locate current clinical trials, and find support in dealing with cancer. You may be able to get information on research articles, doctors and hospitals, cancer treatment guidelines, drug information, and integrative therapies.

Unfortunately, there is also a great deal of inaccurate and outdated information online. Some comes from well-meaning but misinformed people. There are also those who purposely try to deceive people, either to sell their ideas or their products. Because of this, it is important to consider the credentials and reputation of the person or organization providing the information. Always remember, not all information is good information.

Knowing What's Reliable

Cancer information on the Internet comes from a variety of sources. Many of these sources are people or groups sincerely trying to help others learn more about the disease, but because anyone can post information on the Internet, some people may simply be passing along information that is wrong, and some may even try to deceive you.

Scam artists and other dishonest people use the Internet for two important reasons: low cost and relative anonymity. Selling a product, whether it's bogus or

legitimate, over the Internet costs much less money than operating and maintaining an actual store. What's more, they can get their message or product out to people all over the world.

This is not to say that you shouldn't trust anything on the Internet, but just that some caution is always advised. Even on reputable websites, it is important to note that the health information is just information and is not a substitute for medical advice from your doctor.

Ask these questions when trying to decide if a source of cancer information is reliable.

1. Who runs this website? Who pays for this site?

Is the site run or paid for by an individual or by an organization? What type of organization (business, government agency, or nonprofit organization) is it? Any reliable health-related site should make it easy for a person 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 page.

You can get an idea about who runs a site by looking at the letters at the end of the URL address. Is the URL *.edu*, *.com*, *.org*, or *.gov*?

- > *.edu* means the source of the information is part of an educational system, such as a university
- > *.org* usually means the source is a nonprofit organization
- > *.gov* indicates the source is the U.S. government
- > *.com* usually means the site is run by a commercial (for-profit) or private source

Knowing the source of the information can be useful because it may give you some insight into why the individual or organization is providing that information. The most reliable sources of health information tend to be government agencies, hospitals, universities, and major public health and health advocacy organizations, whose information is reviewed by noted experts and updated frequently.

The source of funding for the site should also be easy to figure out, as it can affect what content is presented on the site and how it is presented. If the source is a commercial business, such as an advertiser or provider of a service or product, there may be some bias or prejudice in the information. Even on nonprofit websites, if the site is full of ads or is supported or funded by an outside company, it's important to ask yourself whether the information being presented might be slanted in some way. This is not necessarily the case, but it should cause you to be more cautious.

Once you find a website you trust and that meets your needs, you may be able to find links to other useful websites.

2. What is the source of information on this website? How is it documented?

Can you tell where the information came from? Anecdotal reports or "personal stories" called testimonials are less reliable than information based on scientific

data. While testimonials can be emotionally moving, they usually can't be checked for accuracy.

More reputable websites will list references from scientific journals that support the information provided. Information should be balanced, providing the pros and cons of a subject, such as treatment options, and not just one point of view.

Also, look for a disclaimer indicating that the content is intended for information and not as medical advice. Information on the Internet should never replace medical care.

3. How is the information reviewed before it is put on the website? Who writes or reviews it?

Find out who writes the information and how that information is reviewed for accuracy. Medical information should be reviewed by experts in the field on a regular basis.

4. How current is the information?

The field of medicine is constantly changing. What may have been the standard of care a couple of years ago may no longer be the standard of care today. Web pages should include the date the information was posted on the Internet. For example, if information on cancer treatment is several years old, you may want to search for more recent information.

Other Useful Online Resources

Some people may find online support groups helpful. It may be comforting to share your experiences with others facing similar situations. Online support groups are gatherings of people who share information and support over the Internet through chat rooms, discussion boards, or mailing lists. These groups allow people to connect with others around the country and the world.

These places, however, may not be the best source for finding health information, especially if they are not monitored by trained professionals or experts. Any information you receive should be discussed with your health care team to see whether it applies to your particular situation. Also be aware that in some online support groups, medical professionals may serve as moderators of the group.

Adapted with permission from the American Cancer Society