When you need health information, websites can be a wonderful resource. Many sites offer reliable, accurate health information for consumers that is backed up by solid medical research. A good resource to find information is your health plan. For example, Blue Cross and Blue Shield Service Benefit Plan members have access to www.fepblue.org. You can trust the information you access from health plan sites.

Unfortunately, the health information on some websites is not reliable or accurate. Because the Internet is not regulated, people can create sites that say whatever they like. To find health information that is trustworthy, review your sites carefully.

**Features you should look for**

To evaluate a site, start by asking the following questions.

**Q. Does the site tell who is responsible for the site? Does it tell how you can contact the site?**

To find out who is responsible for the site, look for links on the home page that say *about us*, *about this site*, or *contact us*. Check the bottom of the home page for a copyright notice. Look for other links with names such as *our sponsors*, *privacy policy*, or *editorial board*. If you can’t find out who runs the site, you should be suspicious.

A site should make it easy for you to get in touch with the webmaster or the organization that sponsors it. It should give a phone number, e-mail address, or other contact information.
Q. **Is the site’s purpose educational or commercial?**

To find the most trustworthy health information, look for sites run by non-profit educational or medical organizations or government agencies. Usually, these kinds of sites have only one purpose: providing information. You can often recognize these sites by the ending of their name:

- `.gov` for government
- `.edu` for educational institutions
- `.org` for non-profit organizations such as medical foundations and medical associations

Be cautious about using health information from sites that sell products or services. You can often tell these sites by the ending of their name:

- `.com` for commercial

While some commercial sites provide trustworthy information, others focus on information that supports what they are selling, and the health information provided can be misleading or false.

Q. **If the site asks you for information about yourself, does it tell why and explain exactly what it will do with your personal information?**

Sometimes sites want you to give them information about yourself. Some sites have strict safeguards to protect your information but others do not. Some websites even sell your personal information to other organizations.

Before you give anyone your personal information, find the site’s privacy policy. Usually there is a link for it on the home page, often at the bottom. Read the privacy policy carefully and decide whether it gives you the protection you want. If you have any doubts or concerns, do not give any personal information.

Q. **Is the health information on the site based on results from medical research? Is it backed up with references to research studies?**

The most trustworthy health information is based on medical research. Evidence from research studies on patient care tells which types of health care work best for particular health conditions.

Look for health information that discusses the results from medical research. There should be references to articles in medical journals or other sources to back it up.

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**Learn more**

This flyer is part of a series of information resources to help you get good quality health care. For more resources, visit your health plan’s website. Blue Cross and Blue Shield Service Benefit Plan members can go to [www.fepblue.org](http://www.fepblue.org) for more information.
Q. Does the site give the source of the health information? Does it tell whether the information has been reviewed and approved by medical experts?

Sometimes sites have health information that has been written specifically for it. Other times, the information comes from a different source. The site should always identify the information source. If you are not able to tell where the information comes from, be cautious about using it.

A site should say something about the people who wrote the information. You can feel more confident about trusting the information if you know it was written by well-qualified health professionals.

Before health information is put on a site, it should be checked carefully to be sure it is accurate and current. Ideally, the information should be reviewed and approved by medical experts before it is put on the site. Look for descriptions on the home page or links to advisory board, editorial board, reviewers, or review policies.

Some sites give information that compares the quality of care provided by hospitals, nursing homes, medical groups, or other healthcare providers. These sites should explain where the information comes from, what it means, and how it is checked for accuracy.

Q. Does the health information seem unbiased, objective, and balanced? Is it written in a professional manner using simple language?

When you find health information on a site, it should be easy for you to tell which parts of the information are based on solid medical evidence and which are opinions.

You can feel more confident about using health information when it includes and discusses different points of view, mentions limitations of the information, and gives cautions about its use. When opinions are given, they should be backed up with reasons. Be very careful about using information that seems biased, subjective, or imbalanced, such as information that seems to push a particular point of view.

Health information for consumers should sound professional and be easy to understand. Terms that are unfamiliar or technical should be clearly explained. When information is poorly written or too complicated, it is easy to misinterpret.

Q. Is the health information up to date? Is there a regular review and update of the site?

A website should include dates that tell you when the health information was prepared and when the site has been reviewed and updated.

Q. Overall, does the health information seem reasonable and believable?

Trust your instincts about any health information you find. If something doesn’t sound reasonable and believable, then don’t use it.

When you see your doctor, you can talk about the health information you found. You may want to take a copy with you to your visit and ask questions about it.
Four good sites to start an Internet search

The four government sites listed below have information that is reliable and up to date. Each of these sites has links to other sites that also provide trustworthy health information.

www.medlineplus.gov
Run by the National Library of Medicine, this site includes a medical encyclopedia and detailed information on medical conditions, prescription drugs, and other herbs and supplements. This site gives you access to Medline, which has publications and summaries from all major medical journals published in the English language.

www.cdc.gov
This consumer-friendly site is run by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It includes information on diseases and health conditions, including conditions that are common at different stages of life, or for specific groups of people. It has health-related information and advice for international travelers.

www.healthfinder.gov
Health Finder is run by the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. It includes an online health library that tells about treatments for hundreds of different health conditions. There are many links to help you find a doctor and other health providers, depending on your needs.

www.ahrq.gov
This site is run by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). It focuses on medical research to help improve safety and quality of health care. The consumer part of this site has detailed and practical guides to help you get quality care. It includes tips on questions to ask about your health and medical treatments.

The four government sites listed above are good places to start, but there are many other sites that also have reliable and accurate health information such as your health plan’s website. See the end of this flier for a list of recommended sites with trustworthy health information.

Tips for finding and using health information

• Visit more than one site and compare what you find. In general, information is more trustworthy when you find the same type of information on more than one site.

• Collect health information from other sources besides the Internet. For example, you could ask your doctor, other health professionals, and libraries.

• Talk with your healthcare team about health information you find on your own. Consider bringing the information with you to a medical visit. You may want to ask questions about it, especially if it disagrees with something you’ve been told.
References

Tips in this flier are based in part on the following sources:

- Health on the Web: Finding Reliable Information by the American Academy of Family Physicians (www.familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/)
- A User’s Guide to Finding and Evaluating Health Information on the Web by the Medical Library Association (www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html#1)
- Online Health Information: Can You Trust It? by the National Institute on Aging (www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/publications/onlinehealth.html)
- How to Evaluate Health Information on the Internet: Questions and Answers by the National Cancer Institute (www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Information/internet)

List of recommended sites with trustworthy health information

Websites on health and healthcare information

This site is run by the federal government’s Federal Drug Administration, which approves and regulates medical products. This particular site is designed to educate consumers about how to view healthcare advertising.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov)
This site is run by the federal government’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It has an enormous amount of healthcare information and practical health advice.

Health Finder (www.healthfinder.gov)
Health Finder is run by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is an online health library of treatments for hundreds of different health conditions.

MedlinePlus (www.medlineplus.gov)
MedlinePlus is a comprehensive source of health information designed to help answer consumer health questions. It brings together current information from several government agencies devoted to health care and health research.

National Institute on Aging (www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications)
This website offers numerous informative publications and consumer guides. Although the information on this website is oriented toward older adults, it discusses health problems that often start at much earlier ages.
Next steps after diagnosis: finding information and support (www.ahrq.gov/consumer/diaginfo.htm)

This guide provides general advice as well as tips and resources to help you learn more about a specific health problem or condition. It was written by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

Taking time: support for people with cancer (www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/takingtime/)

Written for people with cancer and their families, this booklet discusses feelings and concerns about the condition. The site is sponsored by the National Cancer Institute.

Websites and tools for staying healthy

- Stay Healthy at Any Age, Your Checklist for Health (www.ahrq.gov/clinic/ppipix.htm) or call (800) 358-9295
  
The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force uses evidence from research to set guidelines for screening tests, preventive medicine, and healthy lifestyle behaviors. These guidelines tell what you can do to help stay healthy.

- Portion Distortion Quiz (hp2010.nhlbihin.net/portion/)
  
  This quiz is on the site of the federal government’s National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. It shows how portion sizes of some common foods have grown larger over the years.

Websites summarizing medical research studies

- Effective Health Care Program (www.effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov)
  
  This site is sponsored by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. The Effective Health Care Program produces summaries for patients that tell about effective treatments for selected health conditions. These summaries are based on expert reviews of medical research.

- Cochrane Collaboration (http://www.cochrane.org/)
  
  The Cochrane Collaboration is an international not-for-profit organization that reviews medical research studies about healthcare treatments. This site has easy-to-understand summaries of the findings of its reviews, which are available in the Cochrane Library.

- National Guideline Clearinghouse (www.guideline.gov/)
  
  This government site has technical medical information written for doctors and other healthcare professionals, and also has links to resources that are written for patients.
Websites on choosing a doctor

- **American Medical Association's Doctor Finder** ([webapps.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder/](http://webapps.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder/))
  
  This site can help you find information about licensed doctors in the United States.

- **Administrators in Medicine's DocFinder** ([www.docboard.org/](http://www.docboard.org/))
  
  This site can help you find information from state government licensing boards on the licensing background and disciplinary information of doctors and other healthcare providers.

Websites on communicating with your doctor

- **Questions Are the Answer** ([http://www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer/](http://www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer/))
  
  This site has tips on how to ask your doctor questions. It includes a checklist of questions to ask in different situations. You can customize and print your own list of questions to take with you to a medical visit. This site is run by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

Websites on understanding healthcare quality

  
  This glossary defines important terms used by healthcare professionals, such as adverse effect or diagnostic test.

- **Guide to Health Care Quality: How to Know It When You See It** ([www.ahrq.gov/consumer/guidetoq/index.html#Contents](http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/guidetoq/index.html#Contents))
  
  This booklet by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has information and resources to help people get quality health care.

- **Your Guide to Choosing Quality Health Care** ([www.ahrq.gov/consumer/qntool.htm](http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/qntool.htm))
  
  This guide was developed by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality to help people make healthcare decisions using information about quality. The guide is based on research about the information people want and need when choosing doctors, treatments, hospitals, and long-term care.

- **Quality Tools** ([www.qualitytools.ahrq.gov](http://www.qualitytools.ahrq.gov))
  
  Quality Tools is sponsored by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. The resources include tools addressing specific diseases and health conditions, recommendations for choosing healthcare services, resources for better communication with healthcare providers, and tools for staying healthy and getting safe care.
Websites on comparing healthcare quality

- These government sites can be used to compare the quality of care within a state, county, city, or ZIP code. The purpose of these sites is to help you use information about quality to make good decisions about your health care.
  - For hospital care: www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov
  - For nursing home care: www.medicare.gov/NHCompare
  - For home health care: www.medicare.gov/HHCompare
  - For kidney dialysis facilities: www.Medicare.gov/dialysis

- National Committee for Quality Assurance's Report Cards (www.ncqa.org/tabid/60/Default.aspx)
  The National Committee for Quality Assurance provides quality report cards that include comparisons of health plans, doctors, and more.

  The government has produced a national directory of quality reports called the Report Card Compendium. You can search this database which has more than 200 reports of comparative information on the quality of hospitals, medical groups, individual physicians, nursing homes, and other providers of health care.

Websites on getting safe care

- The Joint Commission (www.jointcommission.org/PatientSafety/SpeakUp)
  This site of the Joint Commission includes a series of patient safety brochures. Topics include how to prevent mistakes in surgery, in medical tests, and in medications.

  This guide is for people who are having non-emergency surgery. The purpose is to help people be better informed about issues they should consider and questions they should ask before surgery.

- American College of Surgeons (www.facs.org/public_info/ppserv.html)
  This site offers patient information on topics that include choosing a surgeon, getting a second opinion, questions to ask when you are having surgery, and information about a number of operations. It includes a brochure that tells how doctors and patients can help make sure that the correct operation is performed on the correct part of the patient’s body.

- Your Medicine: Play it Safe (www.ahrq.gov/consumer/safemeds/safemeds.htm)
  This guide provides information on how to take medicines safely. It answers questions about getting and taking medicines and has forms to help people keep track of their medicines.
• **Educate before You Medicate** ([www.talkaboutrx.org](http://www.talkaboutrx.org))
  
  This site provides tips on how to prevent medication mistakes and is run by the National Council on Patient Information and Education.

• **Being MedWise helps us use medications safely** ([www.bemedwise.org](http://www.bemedwise.org))
  
  This site provides tips on how to prevent medication mistakes and is run by the National Council on Patient Information and Education.

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**Websites on health and health care (non-government sites)**

• **AARP** ([www.aarp.org/health](http://www.aarp.org/health) or [www.aarp.org/health/rx_drugs/](http://www.aarp.org/health/rx_drugs/))
  
  This site has health information from AARP experts and other sources and provides information about medical conditions, tests, and treatments. One section of this site is about prescription drugs and includes tips on using medications wisely.

• **Boston Children’s Hospital** ([www.childrenshospital.org](http://www.childrenshospital.org))
  
  This site has information about how to treat medical conditions that are common in children. It covers how to talk to children about their illness, gives health tips from experts, and tells what children might expect when they go to the hospital.

• **Mayo Clinic** ([www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com))
  
  This site by the Mayo Clinic offers an easy way to look up a disease or health condition and then find out how the disease is treated and what to expect. This site has other health information including a planner for healthy living.

• **Medical Library Association’s A User’s Guide to Finding and Evaluating Health Information on the Web** ([http://www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html](http://www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html))
  
  This guide helps people figure out whether a site has reliable information or not. It also has the librarians’ “top ten” list of health information sites for consumers.

• **University of Pittsburgh Medical Center** ([www.upmc.com/HealthManagement/](http://www.upmc.com/HealthManagement/))
  
  This site gives reader-friendly information on many health topics, medical conditions, and medications and includes dozens of brochures to download and print.