How to Find Cancer Resources You Can Trust

Learn how to identify sources of misinformation about cancer—and how to find truly reliable information.

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Cancer and other health information, whether in print or online, should come from a trusted, credible source. Government agencies, hospitals, universities, and medical journals and books that provide evidence-based information are sources you can trust. Unfortunately, it has become very common for misinformation to be found online and in print. Too often, some websites and print media provide misleading or incorrect information. If a source makes claims that are too good to be true, remember—they usually are.

There are many websites, books, and magazines that provide cancer and other health information to the public, but not all of them are trustworthy. Use the resources provided below to safeguard yourself when reviewing sources of health information.

How to Trust the Websites You Visit

Online sources of cancer and other health information should make it easy for people to learn who is responsible for posting the information. They should make clear the original source of the information, along with the medical credentials of the people who prepare or review the posted material.

Use the following questions to determine the credibility of health information published online.

- Who manages this information? The person or group that has published health information online should be easy to find somewhere on the page.
- What are the letters at the end of the web address? Government websites end in “.gov” and those ending with “.edu” are run by a university or other educational institution. These are sources that you can usually trust. If you see “.org” or “.com” at the end of a web address, it may also be a trusted site. However, check it closely to make sure.
- Who is paying for the project, and what is their purpose? You should be able to find this

information in the “About Us” section. Are they selling something or promoting a “cure”? If so, be very wary!

- What is the original source of the information that they have posted? If the information was originally published in a research journal or a book, they should say which one(s) so that you can find it.
- How is information reviewed before it gets posted? Most health information publications have someone with medical or research credentials (e.g., someone who has earned an M.D., D.O., or Ph.D.) review the information before it gets posted, to make sure it is correct.
- How current is the information? Online health information sources should show you when the information was posted or last reviewed.
- If they are asking for personal information, how will they use that information and how will they protect your privacy? This is very important. Do not share personal information until you understand the policies under which it will be used and you are comfortable with any risk involved in sharing your information online.

How to Use Social Media and Email Safely

It’s common to go to social media sites to find cancer information. These sites (such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) can be helpful when they are up-to-date and trustworthy. They are also good ways for people to connect with others who have similar health issues and questions. Related, mobile apps are often used to track health activities, such as diet and exercise. Some people use them to record medicine schedules or doctor visits. Using these methods can be very useful. However, not all are reliable or safe.

It’s important to only follow social media from reputable sources. Ask the same questions when using social media that you would ask for using a website. Many trusted organizations have social media accounts that link to their websites. For example, the National Cancer Institute has an official Facebook page, YouTube page, and many Twitter accounts from its offices and departments.

Always use caution when using your email or texting. Do not click on a link in a message unless you know or trust the sender. And never open an attachment unless it comes from a trustworthy source. This is true whether you’re on your phone or your computer.

Reading other people’s stories about their cancer

When it comes to personal social media accounts, it’s common for users to post their experiences

with cancer. This may include:

- how they're feeling physically
- treatments they're going through
- complementary therapies they're using, such as a type of diet or supplements
- what feelings they're having

But remember that everyone is different. Even someone with the exact same kind of cancer has a different body and health history from you. And never take recommendations for treatment or medicines from someone other than your doctor. You don't know where or how the user got their information. You also don't know if the information is current, or what the user's knowledge of cancer is.

For more details and information about evaluating online resources, including websites, social media, mobile apps, and fake news sites, see NIH's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health's webpage, Finding and Evaluating Online Resources.

Books about Cancer

A number of books have been written about cancer, cancer treatment, and complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Some books contain trustworthy content, while others do not.

It's important to know that information is always changing and that new research results are reported every day. Be aware that if a book is written by only one person, you may only be getting that one person's view.

If you go to the library, ask the staff for suggestions. Or if you live near a college or university, there may be a medical library available. Local bookstores may also have people on staff who can help you. If you find a book online, look very carefully at the author's credentials, background, and expertise. Questions you may want to ask yourself are:

- Is the author an expert on this subject?
- Do you know anyone else who has read the book?
- Has the book been reviewed by other experts?
- Was it published in the past 5 years?
- Does the book offer different points of view, or does it seem to hold one opinion?
- Has the author researched the topic in full?
- Are the references listed in the back?

Reading Magazine Articles about Cancer

If you want to look for articles about cancer that you can trust, search online medical journal databases or ask your librarian for guidance. He or she can help you look for medical journals, books, and other research in cancer that has been done by experts.

Articles in popular magazines are usually not written by experts. Rather, the authors speak with experts, gather information, and then write the article. If claims are made in a magazine, remember:

- The authors may not have a lot of knowledge in this area.
- They may not say where they found their information.
- The articles most likely have not been reviewed by experts.
- The publisher may have ties to advertisers or other organizations. Therefore, the article may be one-sided in the information or view(s) it presents.

When you read these articles, you can use the same process that the magazine writer uses:

- speak with experts
- ask lots of questions
- decide if the information is right for you

Anatomy of a Cancer Treatment Scam

The Federal Trade Commission developed this video to help people maintain a healthy level of skepticism when they are searching for information about cancer, so that they don't become victims of fraud.

Where to Get More Help

Cancer Treatment Scams A page from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) that advises people to ask their health care provider about products that claim to cure or treat cancer and offers tips for spotting treatment scams.

How to Spot Health Fraud A page from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that describes the ins and outs of health fraud with tips on how to avoid it.

Quick Tips for Buying Medicines Over the Internet Also from the FDA, this page explains how to safely buy medicines online, including a link to its source for online pharmacy information, BeSafeRx.

Evaluating Cancer Information on the Internet Developed by the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), Cancer.Net provides information, including common misconceptions about cancer and tips to evaluate the credibility of online cancer information.

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