Health Misinformation

What You Need to Know

You can look online to learn about a health condition, a treatment, a vaccine, a diet or cosmetic procedure. But, just because it's online doesn't make it true. Getting and sharing false or misleading health information can lead to life-threatening decisions. Here is what you need to know.

What is health misinformation?

- Health misinformation is any content that is misleading, false or not accurate.
- Misinformation goes against the best scientific evidence available at the time.
- Scientific evidence is based on facts and data that either support or disprove a claim or theory.
- Scientific evidence can change as more studies are done. For this reason, it is important to look for the most current information.

Why is health misinformation a problem?

- Misinformation can cause people to make decisions that harm their own or other people's health.
- When health misinformation spreads it can create confusion and mistrust.
- It can make it harder for health professionals to keep people and communities safe.

The most common types of health misinformation include:

- Unproven cures and treatments for cancer.
- Claims of vaccines causing injury or death.
- Miracle drugs or supplements that help you lose weight or build muscle.
- Therapies not backed by scientific evidence.
- Claims that particular medications are effective for conditions other than their approved purpose.


Hearsay is information you have heard but do not know to be true.

Know how to find reliable health information online.

- Look for health information websites that list their sources.

- Sources such as public health organizations, colleges and universities offer accurate health information, backed by the latest research.

- Look for the most current information.

- Be wary of information that is solely based on someone's opinion. Reliable health information will have supporting data and evidence.

- Is the website trying to sell you a product or service? Sometimes profit making can lead to the use of misinformation.

- Commercial websites or blogs by individuals may offer advice that can help you cope with certain conditions or treatments, but always double-check the health advice.

- Get a second (and a third!) opinion. If you read or hear something health-related, try to find other sources that offer information on the same topic. Or, ask a health care worker who is part of your community. Search online for a community health clinic near you.
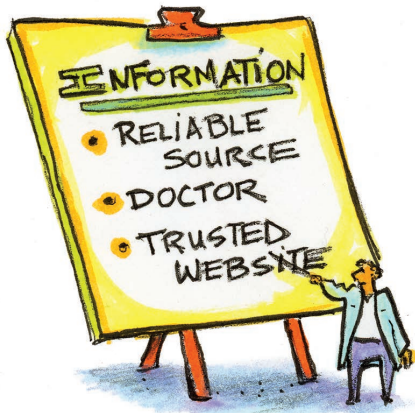
Before sharing information you find online, ask:

- ✔ Does my local public health department or the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have information about the topic?
- ✔ What does my doctor or nurse think?
- ✔ Can I find another credible source that can confirm the claim?
- ✔ Does the website list a source you can trust? If not, search elsewhere.
- ✔ Was this information created or shared for financial or political reasons?

If you're not sure, don't share!

Got health questions?

The internet can be a valuable source of information. However, what you find online should never be a substitute for medical advice from a health care professional who knows you.

With so much health information available online, how do you know what is accurate or true? These tips can help you learn how to find reliable sources. For more information on why health misinformation is a problem, visit the Surgeon General's website at www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral.

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This pamphlet is not a substitute for professional medical care. If you have questions or concerns, please talk with a health care provider.