# How to find the best medical information online

January 25 2013, by Deborah Netburn

If you turn to Google before turning to a doctor when you're feeling icky, you're not alone.

Last year, 1 in 3 Americans typed their symptoms into search engines and medical websites before seeing their physician, according to a [Pew Research Center](#) study released recently.

Searching for [medical advice](#) online can never replace a visit to a living, breathing doctor, but there are ways to weed through the online clutter and get reliable information.

Medical experts say you can't trust any single site to always have the best or most up-to-date information on any condition, but some sites are more likely to be helpful than others.

Several doctors recommended MedlinePlus, a website sponsored by the National Institutes of Health and managed by the U.S. National Library of Medicine. It has easy-to-read and understandable definitions and explanations of diseases, drugs and supplements. Each entry is accompanied by links to other sites and research deemed trustworthy by the medical archivists.

Dr. Wendy Sue Swanson, a pediatrician at Seattle Children's Hospital, tells her patients to check the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) website at CDC.gov and the American Academy of Pediatrics' website at HealthyChildren.org for peer-reviewed medical

information.

"In general I like sources affiliated with hospitals," said Dr. Kevin Pho, a primary care physician in New Hampshire. Websites whose addresses end with .org and .gov are also good, he said.

If you come across a website with lots of advertising, experts say, take the information with a grain of salt. Some sites tailor the information on their page to please their advertisers.

Also, the Medical Library Association has put together a list of consumer health sites that it has deemed "most useful": www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html.

The list includes the association's favorite sites for information about cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

The vast majority of people who search for health information online go straight to search engines such as Google or Bing for the sake of convenience, the Pew study found. That's fine, but you can help ensure that you get the best information by narrowing your search terms.

For example, type in "cancer, chemotherapy, side effects" rather than just "cancer." Or "children flu shot, AAP" to get information about the flu shot from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Additionally, if you are doing research online before seeing a clinician, keep a digital or paper trail of where you got your information.

"Many of my patients come in hesitant about vaccines because of something they heard online, but when I ask them who wrote it, they don't really know where they found it," Swanson said. "What I want is families to grab it, print it, and then we can look at it together."

And if you're worried that your doctor is going to roll his or her eyes when you show up with a stack of printouts or a smartphone loaded up with URLs, get over it.

"We need to face the reality that because of the Internet, patients are more empowered," Pho said. "We can't see ourselves as gatekeepers. We need to see ourselves as curators who can shepherd patients through an abundance of [information](#)."

Besides, trying to figure out what to do when you're feeling sick before visiting the doctor is nothing new.

"People are starting the triage process at home, as people have always done," said Susannah Fox, who worked on the study for Pew's Internet and American Life Project. "Now they just have more resources. Instead of looking in a book and calling your mom, you look up your symptoms online and read a blog post about someone who had the same diagnosis."

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ON THE WEB:

-MedlinePlus, from the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. National Library of Medicine: [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/)

-U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

-HealthyChidren.org, from the American Academy of Pediatrics: [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)

-Useful resources from the Medical Library Association: [www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html](http://www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html)

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