Dear Alice,

The Internet has lots of false facts on it. I want to know if I should consider all the health/drug/sex/emotional stuff as fact in science/doctor advice, and what areas are not so qualified in knowing. The reason being is I want to be more informed, and I don't like to be mistaken in passing along knowledge that I don't know to be credible or not.

Answer

Dear Reader,

The Internet is an amazing medium because it allows tens of millions of individuals, organizations, governments, and companies to produce and access information on just about anything. The Internet is also troubling because it allows tens of millions of individuals, organizations, governments, and companies to produce and access information on just about anything. Lots of factual, well-researched info is available on-line. There's also a load of e-crap. You're very wise to pick and choose your sites carefully.

So, whose health home page can you trust? It may be impossible to answer this question with absolute certainty, but here's a smarter-surfing checklist that might help you decide what information to take in and pass along:

- **The producer of the web site is clearly identified.** Are the author(s), sponsoring organization or agency, posting company, or any other creator(s) easy to find and clearly displayed? Is there a way to contact them to make comments or get additional information? "No" to these questions might cause one to think twice about using this site at all.

- **The credentials of the creator(s) are listed.** If the information on the site is coming from an organization or company, what is its connection to it? For example, it makes pretty good sense for the American Cancer Society to host a page of cancer prevention information. On the other hand, if a tobacco company did the same, you might be wiser to get the goods from the former. If individuals are responsible for the material presented, what are their backgrounds and for whom do they work? If you can find this data, make your best judgment about whether or not they're credible providers of the information that you're reading.

- **Sources of information are cited.**
  When you read something like, "Most Californians eat breakfast," or "sleeping with one
sock on has been proven to reduce hair loss," are these declarations attached to sound research? "According to a 1998 study conducted by the California State Census Board published in the journal, *Eat U.S.*, 81 percent of California residents eat breakfast," is a good example of complete source citing. This way, you can go right to the source to confirm what's been presented. (Both of these quotes are made up, by the way).

- **Other sources of information are provided.**
  There are usually multiple sources that can talk about one topic. *Go Ask Alice!,* to name one health info provider, is not the only source of help for alcohol and other drug concerns. That's why you'll frequently find other institutions, hotlines, books, and experts listed for additional information on these topics.

- **Posting dates are listed, and updated information is provided.**
  There's an enormous amount of health information that's generated from all corners of the globe every day. Can you tell when the information you're perusing was published, and whether or not it has been, or will be, updated? This is no easy process for a web site producer, but an explanation of how a producer goes about this task is most likely available.

- **Advertisers are not influencing content.**
  This may be your toughest determination of all. Compare the subjects and suggestions you're reading with the types of products and services that may be advertised within, or along side, content, or somewhere else on the site. Pay attention to whether you think advertisers on the site are influencing the content of the articles you're reading.

The Web's mind-boggling quantity of information, along with how easy it is to those connected to access it, is quickly making the Net a one-stop shopping center for everything you always wanted to know. Let's remember that it's not the only source?and in many instances avoid making it the source?of health advice and care. There are still real, live health care providers, telephone hotlines, and libraries (places that have actual books, journals, and professionals that can help you find exactly what you're looking for... Information).

More health information is better. And as you've pointed out, it also means looking more carefully to determine if what we're being told is really the "best medicine."

Alice!
Category:
General Health [2]
Miscellaneous [3]

**Related questions**

Don't 'Go Ask Alice!' ? Get medical attention immediately [4]
Online eating disorder support resources [5]
Does a shampoo additive (sodium lauryl sulfate) cause cancer? [6]

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Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

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Links