

## The “Dos” and “Don’ts” When Searching for Health Information Online: How to Recognize a Reliable Source

We have a wealth of health information at our finger tips. If someone does not know something they simply go online and type it into their favourite search engine to find an answer. This is one of the most exciting parts of technology, but it is also one of the most frightening parts. Too often medical problems are self diagnosed and treated using online information. The frightening part is anybody can put information online. They do not have to be an expert or a professional. It is important for people to be their own informed health advocate and take a preventative approach with managing their health, but when using online information they need to be cautious about what they find. There are many dos and don’ts to think about when deciding if the information you have found is reliable.

There are several *don’ts* to consider. Do not use a source if you answer yes to any of the following:

1. Are they selling you a product or service for a financial gain? A reliable source will provide information without trying to create hype or sell a product. There may be products and services available for sale, but they will not be the main focus.
2. Do they claim to cure everything from colds to cancer? No product or treatment can cure everything. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
3. Do they claim the government is suppressing them or will not allow the public to find out about a discovery? If a source contains conspiracy theories then it is not reliable.
4. Is the evidence provided in the form of testimonials? A reliable source will reference evidence-based research. A testimonial is an individual case and cannot be applied to the general public. Testimonials are often used when there is little or no scientific research to back up a claim.
5. Is the person providing the information a celebrity? Reliable information has scientific facts to back it up. It does not need a celebrity endorsement.
6. Is the author against standard medicine? A reliable source will support and encourage your relationship with healthcare providers instead of trying to replace it.
7. Is the argument bias or one sided? A reliable source will present both the strengths and weaknesses of the findings.
8. Is dramatic language used? Unreliable sources often use dramatic language such as “breakthrough, amazing, and miracle!” to create excitement and to make what they are saying sound better. It is easier to believe something that is exciting and fun. A reliable source will present the facts as they without dramatic language.

There are some *dos* to consider also. Do look for:

1. The author. If you cannot find an author then do not use the source unless it is from a reliable organization.
2. The author’s credentials. An educated expert will have recognizable credentials following their name. Credentials will tell you the author’s level of education.
3. References. If the information does not have references look at the author’s relationship to the topic and ask yourself “is this person qualified to provide an expert opinion on this topic?”
4. The date of the source. Make sure the information is recent as scientific and medical research is always evolving. The dates of the references used should also be recent.
5. The domain of the source. Educational institutions are .edu and governments are .gov. These domains will usually provide reliable information. Domains such as .net and .com are individual or commercial. The domain .org is often a non-profit organization which often has reliable information, but their main goal may not be education so be careful when using these sources.

There are many good, reliable sources of information online but it is difficult to know what information to trust. Remember that there is also value in talking to real healthcare providers. Healthcare providers are trained and educated in their field and are the best people to get medical advice from.