

# A parent's guide to health information on the Internet

The Internet can be a rich source of information on child and youth health. But it isn't always clear whether the information is reliable. Trustworthy health information should be objective, unbiased (not have an 'agenda') and based on scientific evidence.

Some websites can be a source of confusion and offer conflicting information about health questions. Many health-related discussion forums, blogs or social media accounts allow people to share their personal experiences, opinions or stories. When it comes to the health of your child or teen, it's best not to follow the advice of these sources without first talking with your doctor.

**Visiting a website or getting information online should never replace a doctor's visit.**

The following questions can help you rule out websites as sources of misinformation:

- **Is there a conflict of interest?** Many websites sell products or promote a specific opinion. If the person or organization responsible for the website makes money from the site's advice, then they may be in a conflict of interest. A website can also have a conflict of interest when the goal of the site doesn't involve making money. Sometimes a conflict of interest is obvious, but other times it's not.
- **Who is responsible for the information and how can I contact them?** Look for an "About us" or "Contact us" link to find out more about the organization. It's best not to use information from a site if you can't tell who is responsible for the content.
- **Has the site been developed by a reputable leader** such as a government organization, professional association, or respected non-profit organization? Some special interest groups publish information that isn't based on evidence, or that focuses on the organization's opinion of an issue.

- **Is the website selling a product or service?** Websites that sell or promote a product or service are biased (have an 'agenda'). There is often no scientific evidence to back up their claims. Even if the site isn't selling a product, it might be sponsored by companies that can benefit from the advice on the site. However, if a sponsor provides an 'unrestricted grant,' it usually means they are not involved in content development.
- **Is the information presented in a professional way** using clear and easy-to-understand language? Or is it based on the experiences of a few individuals who may not have professional expertise in that specific area?
- **Are there ads on the site?** While there are good sites that sell ads to cover their costs and are not in a conflict of interest, it's still a good idea to know the source of the information.
- **What information does the website collect and why?** A reputable website will have a privacy policy that clearly explains what it does with any personal information it collects.
- **Is the information credible?** Credible information is based on up-to-date evidence that comes from proper research. Unless you have special training in 'research methods', it can be hard to tell if health information is based on proper research. Look for the following when trying to find credible information:
  - **The information is recent.** The website should clearly show when the information was posted, reviewed or last updated. The dates can often be found at the bottom of the page.
  - **There is evidence to support the advice.** Even an expert opinion is still just a point of view unless it's supported by evidence. In some cases, the opinion of recognized experts may be your best option, but only when good evidence isn't available.
  - **The information is peer reviewed.** That means that it has been reviewed by other experts in the field. The site should specify the type of peer review (for example, a board or committee of experts that is not in a conflict of interest). Websites that are not peer reviewed may have unproven claims that seem too good to be true. Unfortunately, they often are.
  - **The site explains or provides references.** The website should be specific about the source of any information by providing a list of references, studies or articles.

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Community Paediatrics Committee

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Last updated: October 2022



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